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# Analysis Parent Engagement Fund (PEF) Programme



UNIVERSITY OF  
**BATH**

## The REAL and Parental Engagement Network Projects

Dr Janet Goodall

In association with:



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## **Executive summary – key messages from both projects**

- Parents and practitioners were overwhelmingly positive about both the REAL and the PEN programmes
- Practitioners in both projects valued the training they received
  - Particularly in the PEN project, practitioners also valued the chance to interact with staff from other settings
- Relationships were an important theme in both projects. All stakeholders in both projects experienced enhanced relationships, between parents and staff, between parents themselves and between parents and children
- Home visits were felt to be very useful by staff and parents
- Both projects increased capacity within settings for engagement with and support of parents, and seem to have supported sustainable practice
- Both projects reported increased parental engagement with children's learning

## **Structure of this report**

Results from both the REAL and PEN projects are reported and analysed thematically. The projects are first treated separately, and then overarching themes from both are brought together in a discussion section. This is then followed by a section which makes recommendations for policy, practice and further research.

This report covers qualitative data, amassed from interviews with parents, practitioners and project staff, as well as from documents provided by the project teams.

In making any assessment of these projects, this report should be read alongside the quantitative evaluations provided by the team from the Department of Education at the University of Oxford (such as Sylva and Jelley 2017).

## **Key Messages from the REAL project**

- Practitioners and parents were overwhelmingly positive about both the project itself and its impact for families, children and settings.
- The main challenges faced in the implementation of the REAL project related to scheduling home visits, as these often had to be rearranged with families.
- Practitioners were very positive about the value and usefulness of the REAL training.
- Parents' responses show general satisfaction with the home visits, regardless of the number of visits they received
- Some parents had concerns about why/how they were selected for the project
- The REAL programme is reported to have had positive benefits, such as:
  - Improved relationships between staff and parents (often attributed to the home visit experience)
  - Improved skills and progress for children, including greater confidence, especially in speaking
  - Improvement in parental engagement with children's learning and the home learning environment and parental self-efficacy



# **The Making it REAL (Raising Attainment in Early Literacy) programme**

“Working together to improve outcomes for children is worth doing”. [R4]<sup>1</sup>

The main data from the REAL project will be reported under the following themes: Recruitment, Retention, Impacts for Children, Parents, Staff and Settings, the Value of Home Visits, the Value of the REAL project for all stakeholders, and Overall Satisfaction with the Programme. Data arise from a series of 17 documents; information about these documents is found at the end of this section of the report and a list of documents is found in Appendix Two<sup>2</sup>.

## **The Making it REAL programme**

The Making it REAL programme (hereafter, REAL) is based on the ‘ORIM’ (Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and Model) framework (Hannon, Morgan et al. 2006). Practitioners work with parents in settings and during home visits. The programme has been shown to be largely successful in previous trials in England (Lea, Greene et al. 2015).

## **Recruitment to the REAL programme in Oldham**

Most of the settings selected families for inclusion in the project, and some settings faced challenges in the selection of families who both fit the programme criteria (e.g. might benefit from inclusion) and who would be likely to take up the offer if made [R17].

Practitioners reported that the launch events “prior to the start of the project work” [R17] in the project had worked well, in that the events gave parents an idea of what the programme would be like, and allowed staff to complete the observation sheets required by the project. During the events, families were able to see what was involved in the programme, and join in enjoyable activities with their children. This also allowed the families to see who else was involved, and to “alleviate concerns about stigmatisation” [R17] (see below). One setting reported that families feeling that they were “‘Being chosen’ and ‘made to feel “special’ worked well” [R4] in making families feel comfortable about their inclusion in the project.

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<sup>1</sup> Notations in square brackets, such as [R4], denote the document from which the data mentioned comes – see Appendix Two for a full list of documents.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1 for a description of the process of data analysis

This argues a conscious move away from a deficit model of choosing families (see Discussion section).

The fact that REAL practitioners were situated in local settings, and working with families they either already knew or would come to know as a result of their daily work was considered to support recruitment efforts. This familiarity “helped to build relationship and trust with families” [R17]. The expert knowledge of practitioners was also useful in the recruitment process itself, as practitioners already knew the families likely to be involved. Another respondent highlighted the importance of the early home visits for establishing a relationship with the families and of supporting their continuing work in the home learning environment between visits [R17].

A practitioner also reported the value of having parents who had experienced the programme the year before speaking to parents new to REAL[R17]. This made recruitment of new parents easier.

## **Retention**

The challenges for retention included factors outside the settings’ control, such as families moving house or illness[R17]. There were also logistic difficulties of scheduling home visits for all families, working around family commitments, and ensuring the families actually participated in these visits[R17]. Another practitioner suggested sending text messages as reminders to families about the home visits, and what to do if families needed to rearrange; these helped to overcome some of the logistic challenges[R17].

Successes in retention were reported, particularly in response to the benefits which derived directly from the home visits (see below). Children enjoyed having their practitioners visit their home, and “the happiness displayed by the child helps to retain the parents and other family members who also see the benefit for the whole family, particularly other siblings” [R17].

### Initial concerns from parents about their involvement

There was a further challenge was around “allying the concerns parents may have in being identified for the project and what their involvement may entail” [R17]. Staff reported initial trepidation about home visits from parents [R4 and R14], both from concerns about why they had been selected (the possibility of stigmatisation, or of selection as a result of negative judgements about their parenting skills) and concerns about what might be involved (parents

might, it was said, worry that they would be called upon to read to their children, thus exposing issues around their own literacy).

However, staff reported that parents' concern quickly dissipated, "But after the first one [visit], they couldn't wait for the second" [R14].

## **Impacts for children**

It is important to set the context of this project; early on in the project, a member of staff highlighted the level of deprivation faced by some families, "You can't leave enough [resources] – our children are very needy, e.g. they need everything to make a scrap book" [R4]. At the same point in the project, another member of staff said that the evaluation tools provided were useful in eliciting information about "the child's background" [R4] and helped to highlight assumptions that were made by practitioners, "I was shocked by how many children hadn't [been to] a dentist" [R4]. For the most part, the families involved in the REAL project faced a number of challenges, including financial issues.

Interviews with parents and staff [R11 – 15] show that the REAL project produced benefits for children, families and settings, as detailed below.

### Increased confidence

There were 20 comments coded under this heading<sup>3</sup>. Children were reported to benefit primarily through increased confidence, often displayed in the area of speech and language. "We've noticed a big improvement in the children, their confidence; some children, there's one little girl... she wouldn't speak to us and to see her getting up and going to the lady who's doing the story telling... is really a big step for the child, so it's really good" (R 13)<sup>4</sup> This increase in willingness to speak is echoed by both parents (R 14) and staff (R 13). For some respondents, this increase in confidence in children arose from familiarity, "I think the programme has made [child name] familiar with people" (R 13). Staff link these improvements to the children's confidence and building relationships with parents as the best aspects of the programme. Staff highlighted the increased relationships with parents (R10), and some credited the improvement in children's confidence to these relationships. Children's increased confidence was also linked by staff to better outcomes, "the more secure they feel in themselves, the better the learning is, so... the data has improved" (R 10).

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<sup>3</sup> Comments were coded thematically (see Appendix One for a discussion of the analysis of data). This means that some comments may be included under more than one heading.

<sup>4</sup> This interview took place in Oldham Library, during a time children were listening to and interacting with a story teller.

This benefit extended to families as well, “One child didn’t speak and his mum was agoraphobic.... Wouldn’t come into school and speak, but she got to know that close circle of ...families and now he’s one of the most confident in reception and she has no worries coming into school and talking” (R13). The respondent put this progress down to the relationships which had been built as a result of the REAL programme, and interestingly as modelling is one of the elements of the programme framework, associated the child’s growth in confidence to seeing his mother interacting with other people, an instance of modelling.

#### Impacts on children’s literacy

There were six comments coded under this heading. Staff in interviews were clear that the REAL programme had a beneficial effect on literacy (R 14, R13); this included greater willingness to discuss learning, home and other out of school experiences, with staff. Staff particularly mentioned the work around environmental print as contributing to this process. A parent (R11) also noted an increased interest in books and in mark making in her child as a result of the programme.

#### Impacts on children’s relationships

There were seven comments coded under this heading. Staff reported that the REAL programme strengthened their relationships with children (R 3, 10, 14) and with parents (R 14), pointing out that it was beneficial for children to see these relationships between staff and parents grow and prosper. Interestingly, staff also mentioned that the programme had “strengthened the bond between parents and children” (R14). Staff also linked the improved relationships between children and staff to increased results, arising from increased security and happiness among the children (R10).

One of the stated components of the REAL programme is the value of modelling; practitioners model how to use learning resources during events and home visits, for example. However, this reported aspect of the project, that children can benefit from seeing the relationships between their parents and school/setting staff improve, and thus have their own relationships with and confidence about staff improve, is an unexpected but apparently valuable result of the project, and is based on an effect of the modelling of relationships.

### **Impacts for parents**

The connection between the home learning and events in school was made evident to parents during home visits; this connection allowed parents to “see the big picture” (R10), according

to staff. This will in turn support parents' knowledge and understanding of their children's learning processes.

There were no negative comments about the programme itself in the questionnaire sent to parents; one parent reported that they felt another child than their own might have benefitted more from the programme.

These responses, and the entire questionnaire, show parents were very pleased with the programme. Importantly, they also show that many parents were able to express their understanding of the importance of the home learning environment and the part that families can play in supporting children's learning.

Staff reported parents' increased comfort in coming in the setting and in speaking to teachers (R 14, R10). Staff also reported that this increased relationship relieved some of the pressure parents felt in relation to coming in to settings in the first place (R 14). This was echoed by parents themselves (R11). This comfort has also led to parents feeling able to ask for more information about supporting learning at home (R10).

Another group of staff reported that even though one mother was in labour, she wished to continue to attend the scheduled event. Another setting reported that even at an early point, "REAL has definitely enhanced parental engagement already" [R9].

"For me that has been huge, just the parents feeling so comfortable to be able to come and ask questions... 'Is there any way, can you give me some ideas of how I could help with their reading' or 'How can I help, they're really struggling to hold their pencil, what could I do?' Having that familiarity with us to be able to come and just ask us questions" (R10).

This passage has been quoted at length for two reasons. The first is to show the sorts of questions parents are presenting to staff, questions which are directly related to their own part in supporting the learning of their children (R13). Secondly, this passage demonstrates a willingness on the part of staff to share the 'job' of teaching with parents, along with their expertise in these areas. This represents a broader understanding of the value of parental engagement with children's learning than might otherwise have been the case. Both staff and parents reported increases in the home learning environment (R 10, R13), with families using the resources and ideas from the programme with their children, often sharing results with staff either through verbal report or pictures, or the production of artefacts.

This increase in the home learning environment argues the REAL project is having a beneficial effect for children during the project. It is not possible to say if these gains will

continue, but as they seem to be aligned to increases in parental self-efficacy around learning, as well as to better relationships between parents and staff, the ground may indeed be laid for better outcomes in a wider sphere than the literacy focus of the project.

Interestingly, relationships were also fostered among the parent group, which some parents highlighted as beneficial (R11). Staff reported these inter parental relationships helped one parent overcome agoraphobia (R13). Parents also reported value in seeing children in the school environment, as it is often quite different to the home setting (R12). Parents also reported to staff that they enjoyed seeing the relationships between staff members and their children, (R 14) Seeing how the practitioner cared for the child, how the children responded to staff'. This may be related to the comment mentioned previously from a parent to the effect that it was good to see children in the setting; parents are obviously deriving comfort and reassurance from having this greater knowledge.

#### Impact on parental self-efficacy

There were 12 comments about increases in parent's self efficacy, self confidence. Staff and parents throughout this project have shown a need to support both parents' knowledge about supporting learning and their confidence in doing so. "Some parents didn't know how to play with their children, they lacked confidence in playing, in using everyday resources" (R 14). Parents often lacked the confidence to support learning in the home, often because they did not themselves grow up in the types of home learning environments which are best suited to supporting learning [R14]. The REAL programme gave parents the tools, ideas and methods for supporting learning. "It [the programme] helped the parents realise that they didn't need A levels to help their children with literacy", so that "parents are continually telling us they are doing more" [R 14]; parents have also realised that they did not need to spend large sums on new equipment to support learning. Staff report that parents are now asking staff about ideas they have themselves devised to support learning (R 14). Parents also enjoyed increased confidence, both in working with their children and in interactions with staff. Home visits were instrumental in achieving these benefits [R11,12,14,15].

This increased parental self-confidence has spread beyond working with their own children; at least one parent, on the basis of the confidence gained during the REAL programme, has gone on to further study and training (R14).

#### Impact on the home learning environment

"Parental engagement with children's learning has improved" (R 14)

There were 20 comments coded in relation to parents' knowledge of how to support learning. Parents reported wanting to be involved in the project as a means of "doing more" with their children (R 11) and as a means of helping their children gain confidence [R 12].

Six of the responses from the 2017 Survey mention the value of the project for the home learning environment, "understanding and knowledge for the parents" [R9] and "reading books with their children" [R9]. Three practitioners mentioned building relationships between school and parents under this heading (there were 11 responses received). A further comment supports this by mentioning, "The resources we were able to give to families" [R9].

Practitioners commented on the resources provided with the project and their value for families, "Giving families the chance to spend time with their children, and sharing our knowledge for parents/families to use in the home setting" [R4]; "Having that time to spend quality time with their children and be part of their learning and development" [R9]. These quotations highlight the value of the programme as a means of allowing staff to share knowledge with families, to support learning. This knowledge was transferred by "modelling activities and interaction", a theme which recurs throughout the REAL data. This modelling was contextualised for families when staff "verbally explained the importance" of activities such as singing nursery rhymes, reading, mark making and positive praise [R4]; "Modelling, and giving ideas to parents as to what they can do through activities" [R4]. As we have seen in earlier sections some parents at least had asked for such support. This was echoed to practitioners by parents, "parents' feedback – acknowledged the benefit of us visiting... for their children" [R4].

Some responses were particularly important, as they show parental understanding of the purpose and impact of the REAL programme, "It was very good, I learned a lot about helping my child" and "It was good for adults to help us know how our children learn" (both R1). "Helps us with the link between home and school" and "It's something to help my child learn" (R 2), and "We enjoyed this project and got to learn a lot more i.e. reading books and writing" (R 7).

One staff member (R13) made this link explicit, "So it's not just about achievements at school; parents will share their [child's] achievements at home as well". This argues a recognition, on the part of both staff and parents, of the value of the home learning environment; "It strengthened the work parents do at home; they tell us it empowered them" (R 14).

Staff also reported increases in parents' knowledge of how to support learning, such as looking for environmental print, and encouraging activities to support muscle development for mark making, such as allowing children to "write" on the walls of the bath with shaving cream.

Moving on to parents' reports of the impact of the programme, there were 59 responses to the question of whether parents have done new things as a result of REAL. Of these, 54 answered positively, with only five saying that they had not done new things with their children. This shows a significant impact on the home learning environment of those families involved in the project. Parents were able to give free text answers to say what they had done as a result of the project; 32 mentioned things that related directly to literacy, such as going to the library more often, reading more books and mark making.

Other answers related to other aspects of the programme, such as arts and crafts, home baking and singing songs and nursery rhymes. It is also worth noting that some parents used this question as an opportunity to record information about their own learning, reporting "Before I didn't know my son knew his numbers" and even simply, "I have learnt a lot of new things." (Both R8).

It is apparent from these answers that parents undertook new, home based activities with their children, showing improvements in the home learning environment as a result of this project<sup>5</sup>.

## Impacts for staff

Staff were asked what had supported them to provide the REAL programme, as reported in Table 1:

*Table 1 2017 Survey: Support during REAL*

<b>What has helped you run the REAL programme?</b>	<b>Local Authority Support</b>	<b>Local network meetings</b>	<b>Knowledge and confidence from attending the training</b>	<b>Resources provided in the briefing session</b>	<b>Support from management</b>	<b>Working with a colleague</b>	<b>Grant Funding</b>	<b>Other</b>
	2	3	4	3	3	4	3	1

<sup>5</sup> There is, of course, no way at this point to know if parents will continue these activities in the future.



The one “other” comment was: “The grant is really helpful, without it we would not have been able to release staff to go on home visits”.

#### Evaluation tools

Practitioners commented on the strengths and challenges of using the evaluation tools provided in the project. Some found that some parents resented questions about their own education; for at least one family, however, the question led to a “really good conversation” [R4] about the educational system in the parents’ home country.

Staff commented that it would be valuable to “rehearse the questions first” [R4] (arguing, perhaps that the second year of the programme might progress more smoothly?) and also if the questions could help parents provide more clarity for staff about the home learning environment (e.g. how often family members read with children, rather than just if this happens at all).

#### Reflections on training

“The training gave us a clear understanding and expectations. ORIM frame helped plan activities and the coloured cards in the pack, too. The working agreement helped us and parents” [R4].

Overall, staff appear to have seen the training as useful and supportive. Staff also mentioned the value of role play as a preparation for “dealing with parents”, such as parents leaving the TV on during visits. one practitioner commented, “I felt the training gave me the knowledge to go and do the visits” [R4]. Practitioners commented on the value of learning from each other on the training.

Practitioners suggested things that would be helpful for future training; there were only two comments in this section, one requesting research from previous REAL projects, so that practitioners could see what had and had not worked well, and the second was for individual settings to have their pupil premium students identified by the first training session.

Table 2 2017 Survey – Impacts of REAL training for staff confidence and knowledge

Concept	Before the training					After the training				
	None	Not much	A little	A fair amount	A great deal	None	Not much	A little	A fair amount	A great deal
How much knowledge did you have supporting early literacy			1	3						4
How much confidence did you have supporting early literacy			1	3						4
How much knowledge did you have of using the ORIM framework	1	2	1							4
How much confidence did you have in using the ORIM framework	1	2	1						1	3
How much knowledge did you have of using REAL and the ORIM framework				1	3				1	3
How much confidence did you have of using REAL and the ORIM framework				1	3				1	3

This table illustrates the value staff ascribed to their involvement with the REAL project, in relation to their knowledge and confidence. It is significant that, after the training, all staff reported they had a least a fair amount of confidence and knowledge, with the majority of staff choosing to report “a great deal”. Staff felt that the programme’s training had been useful to them.

### Impacts for the schools/settings

Staff described the results of the REAL programme as “really exceptional” for their settings, and pointed to a lack of attrition among parents as one aspect of this (R10). One setting [R10] made the choice to be involved in the project because of the low level of baseline skills presented by the children entering the setting each year; “We just wanted something extra where we could go into their homes and support the parents and give them ideas of ways they could help, because I think often the parents want to do it, but they just don’t know what to do” [R10].

### Impact on home/school relationships

There were 19 comments about the impact of the programme on staff/parent relationships. Staff were clear that the programme had helped support relationships with parents (see also the section on the value of home visits). Staff reported that parents were more willing to come into settings, and to discuss things (R14), than they had been before the REAL programme. Parents were also more willing to share “the wow moments at home” (R13, with R14 echoing this sentiment), such as sharing instances of successful home learning. This sharing helps to build the links between setting and home, and also allows staff to have access to additional information about the learning processes of the children in their care.

There were 12 responses to the question about the benefits of the REAL programme for staff, on the 2017 Survey. Three of these related to changes for practitioners, including “Confidence to communicate with parents”, and comments about gaining knowledge and confidence from the project and training. Three comments related to improved relationships “Even better relationships with parents than we had before”. Three comments related to outcomes for children, including improved data and improved child confidence. The remaining comments related to the funding provided, to parental engagement and to “working with children in their homes” (considering the question, this must be considered to be a benefit for staff, but the practitioner did not elaborate on how this was beneficial).

### **Value of home visits**

Parents and staff were overwhelmingly positive about the home visits involved in the REAL programme.

Table 3 Parental Reports about Home Visits from Parents' Questionnaire

Home Visits	Number of times this number of visits was reported	Parental report on the number of visits received			
Number of visits		Not enough	Right amount	More would be better	No answer given
1	3		2	1	
2	22		10	10	2
3	8		7	1	1
4	15		13	2	
<b>Totals</b>			<b>32</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>3</b>

Table 4 Parental Reports about Home Literacy Visits from Parents' Questionnaire

Literacy visits	Number of times this number of visits was reported	Parental report on the number of visits received			
Number of visits		Not enough	Right amount	More would be better	No answer given
1	11		7	2	2
2	11		7	3	1
3	23		16	4	3
4	11		7	3	
<b>Totals</b>			<b>37</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>6</b>

Families experienced two types of visits: a general home visit (see Table 3), and a visit centred around literacy (see Table 4). As can be seen from Table 3 and Table 4, in all cases bar one where opinion was equally divided, parents reported most often that whatever number of visits they received was “the right amount”; the only exception was for those who received 2 home visits, where 10 parents said that this was the right amount and 10 also said that more would have been better.

It is difficult to say too much on the basis of just these figures. The rate of satisfaction is highest among those who received 4 Home Visits (13/15), but also high among those who received just 1 visit (2/3). Parent receiving 3 visits were also happy with this number (7/9).

Much the same is repeated in relation to the literacy visits. Again, the largest number of responses is shown in the “right amount” column, for each number of visits. What is apparent is that, in every instance, bar the one which was evenly divided, far more parents

were satisfied with the number of visits they received than were not. This may speak more to satisfaction with the visits themselves than to the number of these visits.

*Table 5 2017 Survey Usefulness of visits*

<b>Level of agreement:</b>	<b>Slightly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>
How much do you agree with the following statement? The home visits were useful in handing over knowledge to parents	1		3
How much do you agree with the following statement? The literacy events were useful in handing over knowledge to parents.	1		3

*Table 6 2017 Survey Number of visits*

<b>The project model consists of 4 home visits and 4 literacy events. Do you think this was the right number for the families you were working with?</b>	<b>Right amount</b>
Home Visits	4
Literacy Events	4

As can be seen from Table 5 and Table 6, practitioners overall felt that the visits were useful for parents, and that the right amount of visits had taken place.

Practitioners reported a number of benefits from the early home visits, some of which had been realised, some of which were still hopes for future visits. In three cases, this related to concerns about the child. In one case, “Our mind’s at rest about a child we had been concerned about” [R4]; in a second case, “We were concerned about a child at home but he knows it all [a particular book] so we had a feeling of relief – he’s taking it all in” [R4] and in a third, staff were “looking forward to visiting a child to check out Health Visitor’s concerns” [R4]. This is summed up in another comment, “You see the children in a different light [during home visits]” [R4]. Another practitioner reported on the value of completing the forms “at home, 1:1 was more personal and you get a clear picture and more knowledge” [R4], which continues the theme of an exchange of information between practitioners and parents. Overall, practitioners reported being very pleased with the visits, twice mentioning the positive involvement of male carers, “The dads got warmer during the visit and offered us cups of tea” [R4] and “We were really surprised: a Dad got down on the floor straight away” [R4].

The value of being in the home is echoed in the comments about fathers “warming” to staff, but also in the fact that “parents are comfortable to talk”, even to the extent that one parent

“opened up about her dyslexia”. Although the chain of events is not given staff clearly connected this to good outcomes for the family, as the quotation continues, “She’s now on a college course, and Dad has a job” [R4].<sup>6</sup> Parents’ confidence also manifested itself in being able to ask staff for help with the home learning environment, “Dads tended to say they didn’t know these things would help their child” [R4]. This was echoed by another comment that “leaving materials, like a playdough recipe, was like giving them a new invention”. This argues that the programme was able to support the home learning environment by giving parents new tools to support learning. Good outcomes were also reported for children; after a home visit during which staff used a microphone, a previous shy child was reported to be “the voice of the carpet today [R4]” (signifying that the child was happy to talk in class).

Other practitioners commented on the processes involved in the home visits. These involved the importance of choosing the right staff, “Going on a home visit with the key person”, and “Choosing the right people to carry out the work and building on relationships. Staff also mentioned ensuring that those visiting parents had the language skills need to support families, “The five Bangladeshi families have been allocated a Bangla [Bengali?] speaker” [R4]. One setting reported on the value of texting parents to remind them about visits.

“I went out into the nursery homes... we built that relationships, so they felt more comfortable” (R10 T). This teacher made the point that seeing the staff in their home helped children build relationships with staff in a different way that just seeing them in school/in the setting.

One parent (R14) expressly attributed her child’s increased confidence in speaking to having seen her teachers in her own home; this allowed the child to make a verbal connection between home and the school setting. A member of staff attributed increased parental confidence to the “cementing” of already good relationships with parent, through the vehicle of home visits.

In another setting (R10) a member of staff credited the home visits with not only an increase in children’s self-esteem and confidence, but also with progress in literacy, as well as increased parental engagement. The overall message, then, about the home visits was that they were of value for staff, parents and children.

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<sup>6</sup> One cannot, of course, attribute these outcomes to the REAL programme, on the basis of this information.

### What parents would change about the home visits

Parents were also given an opportunity to say what, if anything, they would change about the home visit part of the programme. 31 responses were received to this question, of which 22 said that no change was necessary. This included comments such as, “Nothing, they were very good, my child really enjoyed the teacher coming to our house” (R 1); Really liked the events – learning about the library and what is on there” (R1); “Nothing, I found it extremely helpful” (R5).

Most of the 9 comments about improving the visits (7/9) were about enhancing current practice, including having more home visits (4) or making the visits longer (1). Three responses (1 in R5 and 2 in R6) suggested in some way a change to the context of the visits, “Teach her more things” (R 6) “Math and reading and listening” (R 6) and “The events seemed quite craft based rather than literacy based” (R5). These last two comments, however, may be indicative not of criticism of the programme per se, but of a lack of understanding on the part of parents about the relationship between, for example, early mark making (including activities such as cake baking, drawing, etc.) and preparation for writing (honing gross and fine motor movements).

Overall, the responses to these questions again demonstrate that parents were overwhelmingly happy with the home visit element of the REAL programme.

### Usefulness of the programme

When asked about the usefulness of the REAL programme, in relation to specific activities, parents reported the following:

*Table 7 Parental Reports of Usefulness of REAL from Parents' Questionnaire*

Activity	Number of responses	How much help were these elements of the REAL programme?		
		Not at all	A little	A great deal
Learning about books	45		11 (24%) <sup>7</sup>	34 (75%)
Making marks, using environmental print	61	1 (1.6%)	10 (16.6%)	50 (83.3%)
Joining in songs	59		6 (10.2%)	53 (89.8%)

When these numbers are examined, it becomes apparent that overall, parents saw the programme as generally a “great deal of help”, as they rated it this way 186 times out of 214

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<sup>7</sup> Percentages are presented merely to give an indication of the level of satisfaction with any given activity; as the numbers are low, great emphasis should not be placed on percentage reports.

answers (86.9%). It is also worth noting that only one of these 214 answers said that the programme had been no help at all.

### Further Comments from Parents

Parents were asked in the questionnaire if they had any further comments they would like to make about the programme; this was a free text answer. There were 38 responses to this (of which one was, “N/A”). Of these responses, 34 were complimentary, such as “It’s good for the children” (R 8), “Great and can’t wait for another child to start” (R 4), “I’m happy with the work you are doing” (R 6), “It was great” and “My daughter loved it” (both R 3), and “Very good, we enjoyed it all” (R 1) and “So enjoyable and great company” (R 2).

### **Value of the REAL project for all stakeholders**

For many of the staff and parents, it would seem that the increase in children’s self-confidence and the relationships with staff were, if not the most important outcomes of the project, then certainly the first ones which came to mind and the ones most often mentioned.

Setting staff stated that the REAL programme was beneficial enough that they intended to continue with it, even after the current round of funding came to an end (R 10, R13), “because we’ve seen the benefit of it so much for parental engagement, raising standards, we just thought it was too beneficial not to carry on” (R 10); “So we can still carry on with the project, that’s how beneficial we’ve seen [it to be], the actual enormous [benefit]” (R 13). Another senior leader saw continuing with REAL as a way to “break down barriers” with parents who struggle with English (R 14), as the project allows staff to “get to know faces” and “build relationships before the summer holidays” (R 14). This leader was also anxious that the training taken by staff for this project should continue to be utilised by the setting.

In this final section, staff demonstrated an understanding of the foundations of the REAL project; it is worth quoting some of these responses in full.

“It’s a fantastic opportunity that means the way children are taught in the future will be different as it helps prepare them for school” [R4]

“Based on research that shows it helps children make progress in school” [R4]

And finally, and perhaps most importantly,

“It’s not who parents are, it’s what they do” [R4].



This sentiment (from the work of Sylva, Melhuish et al. 2008), underlies the whole of the PEF project, supporting in particular families facing disadvantage, to support learning in the home environment.

Staff were asked to record their views of the impact of the project:

*Table 8 2017 Survey Reports of Impacts*

<b>Element of the programme</b>	<b>Some impact</b>	<b>Great Impact</b>
Improved relationships with parents and carers	1	3
Supporting bilingual families	1	3
Changes to classroom or setting practice around early literacy	2	2
Children's improved attainment in early literacy	2	2
Identifying and supporting children who have speech and language needs	2	2
Changes to setting policies and procedures, for example around literacy, home-visiting or parental engagement	2	2
Linking children and families to other services	2	2
Identifying children with additional needs	3	1
Early identification of additional needs in younger siblings	3	1

Table 8 would seem to corroborate what has previously been seen, that staff feel that the greatest impact of the REAL project was on their relationships with families. It is interesting that support for bilingual families was also rated highly; this did not often appear in the interview data.

## **Overall satisfaction with the REAL programme**

*Parents were asked to give an overall assessment of their experience of the REAL programme, using set responses, as shown in*

Table 9. There were 60 responses to this question, of which 41 rated the programme as excellent, 17 as good and 2 as satisfactory. Again, this shows that parents were for the most part, very happy with their experiences with REAL.

*Table 9 Parents' Overall Satisfaction from Parents' Questionnaire*

<b>Setting</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Satisfactory</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Excellent</b>
<b>1</b>	10			10
<b>2</b>	5			5
<b>3</b>	9		2	7
<b>4</b>	8		4	4
<b>5</b>	2	1		1
<b>6</b>	7	1	5	1
<b>7</b>	10		3	7
<b>8</b>	10			10
<b>Total</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>45</b>

### **Would you recommend this programme to other parents and settings?**

Parents were asked if they would recommend participation in the REAL programme to other parents, and this provides the most emphatic proof of parental satisfaction with the programme: there were 49 responses to this question, of which 48 were, “yes”. This again must be seen as an endorsement of the programme by parents. Settings all answered that they would recommend the programme to others.

### **Summation of the Making it REAL project<sup>8</sup>**

Overall, the project seems to have been very successful, at least in the short term. Parents and staff report high levels of satisfaction with the programme, and also report beneficial impacts for children, particularly with relation to confidence and speech and language.

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<sup>8</sup> A full discussion of findings, and links to previous literature, will be found in the Discussion Section, which takes into account both projects.

## The Parental Engagement Network

This section of the report will deal with the Parental Engagement Network. This section of the report is divided into the Phases of the project which were involved, Phases 2, 3 and 4.

Sylva and Jelly offer the following description of the Parental Engagement Network (PEN):

Parental Engagement Network (PEN; <http://penetwork.co.uk>) is a not-for-profit social enterprise specialising in supporting schools and settings to better engage parents, particularly those from disadvantaged communities. It provides training for staff and parents, develops a range of creative projects and sustainable resources, and facilitates networks to share good practice. As part of the Engaging Parents Effectively Programme, PEN has trained teachers and teaching assistants in 51 schools to work with parents, with a focus on disadvantaged families, to help them support their children's learning and build positive relationships with other parents and school staff. Schools have been trained in three different projects. In the Transition Project (Mouse Club) practitioners begin working with parents in the summer term before the child starts nursery or reception<sup>9</sup>. Activities are centred on a toy mouse which is given to children as a transitional object and which needs their help to get ready for school, encouraging them to develop their physical and independence skills, language, and good routines, with support for parents through accessible tip sheets. The Home Learning Project then begins once the child is in nursery or reception, and includes workshops and activities for families such as 'FUN' (Families Understanding Numeracy) maths, and Playclub bags which help support early literacy and phonics through imaginative resources and instructions with links to video clips showing parents how to do the activities.(Sylva and Jelley 2017, 1)

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<sup>9</sup> There was one school in Phase 4 of the project which did not begin to use Mouse Club until September

## **Key messages from the Parental Engagement Network**

The programme resulted in increased confidence for children, parents and staff

- All groups of respondents highlighted the value of relationships
- Respondents often linked enjoyment and engagement in learning
- Practitioners valued the training they received in the programme
- Settings reported gains in all areas, and increased rates of progress for children involved in the project.
- Parents reported gaining skills to support learning in the home.
- Practitioners reported valuing the chance to work and learn together
- Parents, staff and children reported gains in school readiness for all groups.

Overall, the reports on all phases of the PEN project are very positive, in the short term of this research.

## Parental Engagement Network, Phase Two

I think the relationship between school and parents has really improved; a few years ago it wasn't very good... [parents] felt they had no voice...things have changed completely in the last couple of years, so we now have parent volunteers and a parent forum and...they feel like they're being heard and appreciated and invited in more... I think this project is a really big part of that, so they feel more able to come and talk to teachers informally... I feel like it just makes for a nicer atmosphere in school... I think they are keen to help their children, they just don't always know how [36]

This quotation sums up a great deal about this phase of the PEN project. There were 16 documents in the data relating to Phase 2 (though some of these were compilation documents).

This portion of the report looks at the Phase 2 portion of the PEN projects. It will look at three broad areas: Impacts for Children, Parents and Staff.

### Impacts for Children

Impacts for children were reported across parental and staff questionnaires, feedback, interviews and final reports from settings. There were over 240 responses which related to impacts for children from the project. These will be reported under the headings of confidence, enjoyment, engagement in learning, teamwork/working with others, siblings, progress and relationships with parents<sup>10</sup>.

#### Confidence

There were 44 mentions of the impact of the PEN Phase 2 activities on children's confidence, all of them positive. Accounts of increased confidence come from both parents and members of staff. These include statements such as, "T's confidence in class has improved and this has enabled him to form friends with his peers" [15]. "My daughter's confidence was boosted" [3]. "D has more confidence with her letters" [9]. Children were reported to experience gains in both social and academic confidence.

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<sup>10</sup> Many comments were coded under more than one heading.

A number of the comments in this section, as in many others, show the link between what parents do and the impact for children, “A’s mum engaging in all activities which has filled A, a once reserved child, with lots of confidence at school” [15]. “Knowledge to look for things and different letters, shape, song” [9] “Built his confidence a bit more and got to spend time along with me” and “It helped in building his confidence and to spend time with my child” [9]. Increased confidence for children was also often linked to the enjoyment they derived from participation in the project, “Helped her confidence and great enjoyment with activities” [9]

### Enjoyment

There were 71 comments about children’s enjoyment of the project in this phase. Many of these related to the musical activities of the project, “They enjoyed the singing” [1]”Dancing activities” (in response to a question about the best part of the project) [9]. Many comments related to the interaction between children and others as a feature of their enjoyment or at least as related to it, “H enjoyed doing activities together as a family” [9]. “I love the project because it keeps T very busy and she loves anything to do with school staff” [9]. (We will return to this idea of interaction, below). A number of comments also related to the active element of the project, “M enjoyed any activity we need to go out and about for” [9]. “They were all great activities: Our best had to be the get active” [7].

Some of these comments linked enjoyment, progress and engagement, “Helped with confidence and recognition of letters and numbers” [9]; Improved E’s confidence, increased her recognition of objects and counting and describing them” [9]; “Helped her confidence and great enjoyment with the activities” [9]. What is very clear from these responses is the high level of enjoyment experienced by children in the project; there were no negative comments under this heading.

### Greater engagement

There were ten comments coded under this heading. Some of these relate to children being willing to try new things, “We enjoyed the dance activity because H doesn’t really dance. He came out of his shell” [9]. “Staff saw an impact on children’s confidence in numeracy and literacy; engaging in more activities at school” [78]; this comment from a member of staff was echoed by a parent, “I’ve seen improved concentration and engaging in activities.” (These comments clearly overlaps with the concept of confidence). Again, a link is made to relationships, as this comment continues, “Strong relationship, mum-daughter working together” [78].

### Team work/working with others

There were four comments coded under this heading. We have already noted one comment about increased confidence leading to a child now able to form friendships. Another comment made the point clearly, “The project was a good chance to interact with other children and parents and also the children got to help each other out” [9].

### Siblings

An unexpected finding was the number of time respondents mentioned the involvement of and impact on/from siblings, on children in the programme. This was mentioned 24 times. These comments include siblings attending events, “Two of the children came with their mums and siblings; they completed and attended most of the workshops” [15]. This may argue that an openness on the part of the setting to the attendance of siblings enabled parents to attend, as they did not need to arrange child care for their other children.

Many comments reported that siblings were helpfully involved in the project, “Siblings spoke to me at school about doing the activities and one gave written feedback” [15]. “R’s siblings helped with the FUN activities...; JH’s brother helped her with the FUN activities” [15]. Some siblings even “...came and also helped at workshops. J’s sister helped with translating, too” [15]. This involvement had wider benefits for some families, as parents reported, “Brought the sisters closer” [9] and, “They all enjoyed doing the activities together and get on better than they usually do” [9].

It would seem that a good deal of the sibling involvement was initiated by the older children, “Siblings liked to help her and get involved” [9] and some parent consciously connected the project to work with older children, “We have enjoyed the challenge and use it as part of weekly homework that the older children have” [9].

What becomes apparent all through this report, but particularly in section such as this, is the importance of the interactions and relationships involved in the project, between staff and family members, between family members themselves and even between members of different families. We will return to this theme below.

### Progress

There were many (112) comments related to the progress made by the children involved in the PEN projects; all but one of these was positive, showing the value both parents and staff members placed on these activities.

Staff reported the impact on children's achievement, "Seeing the progress children have made" [1] as a benefit of the programme<sup>11</sup>. 24 of these responses related to progress in literacy, and 28 to progress in maths (many of these comments refer to both subjects).

One parent reported that the programme had a positive impact on his daughter's speech and language, "the problems with her speech, that's been take care of basically, she's talking a lot now"; this parent went on to comment on the wider benefits of the project, "She's coming on well, she's writing and reading as well... so very glad of the support, it's made a lot of difference". [6] Other parents reported being pleased with the programme as well, "It help(ed) her learn a lot easier" [9]; "It was useful because it helped her to build new skills" [9].

The theme of interaction continues here, "L's mum had attended all but one workshop and has been the best at completing activities and given feedback. Her child has progressed" [15]. Staff clearly understood there to be a link between the ideas of interaction and progress.

One member of staff reported the difference the PEN project made,

...at the beginning of the year, all the children were...either 22-36 or 16-26 months, their baseline...and then by the end of nursery, they weren't on track, but they certainly, they were working in the 30-50 [month] age band... (interviewer) And is that more of an improvement than you would have expected to see with that group of children? (Staff member) ...Compared to the other children in nursery, yes, they made more progress, and now, apart from one of the children involved, the rest are all on track for reading, writing and maths [36]

### Maths

Many of the 28 comments under this heading were quite short and to the point, "Improved his counting", "D has learnt a lot more with his numbers and counting" "Helped with confidence and recognition of letters and numbers", "Helped with their learning – most notably for shapes and identified some ways of improving counting" even just "Maths" [all 9]. A number of times, as with the quotation above, increases in confidence were linked to progress in maths, "It was a good confidence boost and it helped my child communicate and count" [9]. Others again linked interaction with progress, "Improved their counting and enjoyed

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<sup>11</sup> Specific information from each setting will be reported below



time with me” [9], “Child enjoyed time with parent and sibling joined in as well. Helped with confidence and recognition of letters and numbers” [9].

### Literacy

Parents and staff reported gains in early literacy across a wide range of pupils, in 23 comments. “It helped my son understand what a lot of words mean”; “Recognised the letters. Built their confidence”; Helped with counting and letters” [all 9]. The connection with confidence is made by other parents as well, “Helped with confidence and recognition of numbers and letters” [9]. Staff also reported “an impact on children’s confidence in numeracy and literacy” [78], which explicitly links the two concepts.

The theme of interaction continues here, as well, “N’s mum really engaged with the Playclub bags. This has helped N gain language skills” [36], as well as the quotation above in the maths section which also references number learning.

### Relationship with Parents<sup>12</sup>

There were 36 comments coded under this heading for this phase. Most of these are fairly short and note that the child enjoyed time with the parent/s. Some are fuller, “R’s mum attended some workshops and engaged with her child. She is a parent who is hard to reach and has 4 children under 7. Helped to build her relationship with R” [15]. “It’s very useful and wonderful. Makes kids and parents active [at the] same time” [9]. “The projects are really good and it helps parents bond with the children whilst we are helping towards achieving their developmental milestones” [9]; “Enjoyed extra time together” [9]. “H enjoyed doing activities together as a family and improving as on his listening (attention)” [9]. “We played together more at home and done more together as a family” [9]. “I think M enjoyed doing it because it was just me and her together” [9]. Again, a link was made with confidence, “Built their confidence, enjoyed time with me” [9].

It is interesting how many of the comments made the point that participation in the programme had increased the amount of time parents spent with their children. “Enjoyed extra time together” [9]; “...this project made us interaction [sic] more” [9]. Some of the comments make clear why this should be the case, “The project not only helped the family to learn but also gave us some ideas of what we could do together” [9]. This theme will recur

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<sup>12</sup> Some of the comments here will be reported under the heading of improvements in the home learning environment.

when we come to examine comments around the home learning environment and parents' knowledge.

### Data on progress from settings

These charts show the progress of children in the project as reported by the settings. Table 10 reports on progress seen in various areas by settings.

*Table 10 Progress reports from settings Phase 2*

Area of progress	Irk Valley intervention children	Irk Valley children overall	Rackhouse intervention children	Rackhouse children overall	Russell Scott Intervention Children	Russell Scott Overall	Rolls Crescent Intervention Children	Rolls Crescent Overall
Speaking	80 <sup>13</sup>	63	100	90	75	92	80	67
Writing	80	69	88	87	100	94	100	38
Reading	90	76	88	87	88	90	80	65
Shape, space and measures			88	87	88	94		
Numbers			88	87	88	90		
UW			88	83	88	90	100	71

Tables 12 and 13 report progress from individual settings.

*Table 11 Progress reports from Newall Green Phase 2*

Rate of progress	Intervention Children (%)	Children overall (%)
Less than expected	0	28
Expected	62	52
More than expected	38	19

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<sup>13</sup> These numbers represent the percentages of pupils who made this level of progress

Table 12 Rate of progress in subjects Claremont Phase 2

Accelerated Progress in:	Intervention Children (%)	Children overall (%)
Reading	70	45
Speaking	70	48
Maths	90	80

Staff were asked to rate the impact of the Phase 2 activities, as shown in the table below.

Table 13 Have you noticed any impact?

Yes	A little	Not really
6	3	1

It is difficult to say much that is definitive on the basis of the data from settings as presented here. Settings did not all report on the same measures, making comparison difficult; one setting presented incomplete data (not recorded here).

What can be said with some certainty is that children involved in the project generally made good progress, often doing better than their peers who did not participate.

### Summary of child impacts

Overall, there are very few (2) negative comments about impacts for children from the 307 comments related to children in the Phase two data; this shows clear evidence that parents and staff members alike believed the programme had been of value to the children involved. The numerical data from settings, although somewhat incomplete, would tend to support this claim. Children benefitted in terms of confidence gained and from increased/deepened familial relationships, as well as deriving benefits from the expected areas of early literacy and numeracy.

### **Impacts for Parents**

There were 176 comments coded under this general heading.

### Self-efficacy<sup>14</sup> for parents

There were 16 comments which were coded in relation to impacts on parental confidence and/or self-efficacy. Before examining these in detail, it is worth noting that none of the comments were negative; there are no reports of parents feeling stigmatised or “talked down to” by staff, yet the literature would suggest that this is not an uncommon feeling among parents in such programmes, (see Discussion section).

The theme of the importance of interaction continues here, with parents feeling more confident as their children join in activities, “...the child joined in and mum felt much better and because she had fun she eventually attended all the workshops” [15]. This confidence can have a reciprocal effect between parent and child, “A’s mum – given more confidence in A and her mum built up more confidence as the workshops have gone on – A has become more confident in Nursery, too” [15].

This increase in parental self-efficacy has been fostered by elements of the programme and by feedback from staff, “Our parents get a real kick out of it [the celebration and certificate], I think probably because their own schooling has been limited... There was nothing like this for them, so I think they really appreciate that we appreciate their involvement”. This quotation continues to expand on the mutuality of the situation, “[we appreciate] that they take the time to come in, so I think it’s important that we give back to them and get them onside” [36].

Parents, too, reported increases in their own ability to work with their children, “Was good to learn new songs and learn different activities to do with my child” [9]; “Made me more aware and [have] confidence” [9]. Parents echoed the point made above about interactions with staff, “Teachers send material [and] give a lot of encouragement” [9].

This increase in self-efficacy does not always stop at supporting their children’s learning, however:

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<sup>14</sup> Self-efficacy may be defined as a feeling of mastery arising from positive experiences Bandura, A. (1977). "Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioral change." *Psychological review* **84**(2): 191 - 215, Goodall, J. (2017). *Narrowing The Achievement Gap: Parental Engagement With Children’s Learning* London, Routledge.

In terms of their progress... and I think it has a snowball effect as well, once they come to one thing, then they're interested in lots of things...we've got a reading club on a Wednesday morning now, and it tends to be the same parents that have been to our workshops, ...they're interested in that [36]

#### Parental Knowledge<sup>15</sup>

There were 56 items coded under this heading. This quotation, from a leader in a setting, shows the process by which parents gained knowledge,

I think because our workshops are very hands-on, we make them do things, it's not just sitting and talking at them, because again for our parents that doesn't really work, I'm sure half of what I say just goes over their heads, so, you tend to put lots of things out and say go and have a play, go and have a try with them. So we get the playdough out and we get the books and they go outside and do the mark-making and they absolutely love it... they're like children themselves, they're experiencing what the children are experiencing, so it's not just play, it's learning through play [36].

Parents tended to talk about knowledge gained in two broad ways. The first was knowledge which was particular to their child, "Finding out what C preferred and how well he is progressing" [9], for example, and "To understand where W is up to" [9] "Identifying aspects of R's learning that needed more work" [9]. More frequently, however, parents reported increases in general knowledge about supporting their children, "Learnt new songs", "As a newly adopted mum I found it helpful to give me ideas re learning and play", "New ways of learning through play"; "It has been a good prompt to do things in a more constructive way" Even experienced parents gained from the project, "Already have an older child (and younger) than T so already have some idea on how to engage. However, this project provided fresh ideas and accessories ... Project helps provide ideas to engage with kids and helps their learning" [all quotations from 9]. Staff also noted this increase, "Three fathers came and were involved... I think it opened their eyes to what their children know and learn" [15].

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<sup>15</sup> Again, this category clearly overlaps with others, such as parental self-efficacy. However, there were so many comments relating directly to knowledge gained, that the concept merited its own section.

The theme of interaction continues here, as parents reported learning not only from staff, “Having someone explaining how to do or what questions to do was very useful when putting into practice with K” [9], “The ideas and tips on each activity card” [9], “Provided useful ideas/well printed documentation and accessories which all helped to make activities engaging” [9] but also from other parents (a theme to which we will return), “Chatting to others – learning strategies to help R” [9]; “Time to talk to others. Gave good ideas” [9].

It is clear from these comments that parents’ knowledge of how to support the learning of their children was increased through the PEN projects, and in particular, there was an emphasis on the importance of play for young children’s learning.

#### Parental Enjoyment of the Programme

There were 42 comments coded under this heading; many of these covered the same ground as the section above about children’s enjoyment of the projects. The comments from parents show how much they enjoyed working with their children, “We have enjoyed the challenge” [9], and what elements of the project they enjoyed, including “We liked the exploring walk and the singing challenge the most” [9], I think the most interactive ones are best” [9], I liked the numbers and the drawing” [9]. As mentioned above, even busy parents were able to benefit, “Even though both parents are working this project made us interact more and make learning more fun”. Staff reported parents’ reactions as well, “Three parents in particular really enjoyed the workshops” [77] and “It was a really good project, really beneficial for the school and the parents enjoy it” [78].

Parents often linked the idea of enjoyment with that of learning and supporting their children, “We thoroughly enjoyed the learning activities. It was great to get involved in N’s learning” [9]; “It was a really fun way to help my child” [9], and “Learning with my child” [9]. Again, there were links to other family members, “We used it as part of weekly homework that older children have” [9].

#### Relationships among parents

A relatively unexpected outcome of the PEN projects, but one related to both parental concepts of self-efficacy and to parental enjoyment, was the fact that parents formed relationships among themselves. This was mentioned in 22 comments. Many of these comments overlap with those in previous sections.

Parents seemed to have used the activities as a means of bonding and creating friendships, “Good friendship formed from engaging in different activities” [15]. This seems to have

been effective even when parents faced barriers to interaction, “Engaging an EAL (English as an additional language) mum who didn’t know anybody..., starting the project with the dough was a great informal way to build relationships... They’re getting to know other parents because sometimes I think families are quite isolated...we want the communities to work together rather than being isolated groups... the relationships between parents have built up, which is really nice, they’re helping each other” [15].

Staff report having been quite deliberate about setting the scene for this outcome, “Involve the parents in workshops – encourage parents to get to know one another better – to be able to talk to each other about their children and any queries they may have” [13]. Staff felt that these parental relationships would be beneficial to children, “Parents in particular really enjoyed the workshops and they got to know each other and understand how to help their children at home” [3] and to the parents, “Some of the dads got chatting during workshops and helped fill in forms together” [15]. These friendships in some instances have not become more widespread, “The ones that attended regularly built up a bit of a relationship but they didn’t really talk outside the project” [15], in other cases, however, there were more positive outcomes, “The parents from last year are really encouraging each other, so if they know there’s a workshop on, they’ll say, “Come on, let’s go” so we’ve found that turn out has been higher, it’s had a knock on effect” [36]. Table 14 shows how staff in settings evaluated parents’ increased relationships.

*Table 14 Staff views of how well parents got to know each other*

<b>Not at all</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>A lot</b>
		2 (20%)	2 (20%)	3 (30%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)

### Relationships with staff

There were 9 comments reported under this heading. Staff reported that parents felt more comfortable in school/setting, and were more willing to take part in events. In one setting [36], a translator, who worked closely with staff and parents, appeared to play a pivotal role in these relationships, reporting, “I try to help them [parents] to understand and communication with the teachers and... they feel confident approaching the teacher and the school activities, so they can help their children”.

### Home Learning Environment

There were 30 comments under this heading, 29 of which were positive; many of these obviously overlap with those coded as “parental knowledge” and some with those coded as “parental enjoyment”.

Some of the comments from staff state parents now “understand how to help their children at home” [15] and report that parents “continue to do the activities at home” [15 and 3]. Some of the activities, as in other areas, had knock-on, beneficial effects, “Some parents said they would read more and introduced this as a way of making bed times a lot calmer” [15]. “I think they’re beginning to see the value of what they do” [36]. We have already noted as well that parents and staff have reported that the project had supported families to spend more time with their children.

The one less than positive comment in this section came from a parent who reported a lack of time to engage at home, “I think the teachers [are] supposed to do it in school... because parents have their own jobs to do which take more time” [9]. It is interesting that this comment, which is not at all unusual in the wider literature from staff as well as parents, strikes such a discordant note in this research. It stands alone in giving this sentiment, through the entire data set, which comprises many parents who are in employment or otherwise juggling very busy lives (jobs, large, extended family situations, etc.).

### What parents liked least

There were 15 comments under this heading. Some of the comments were too short to draw much from, cf, “Shapes”, “Singing” and “Songs”. Some were more expansive and helpful in understanding parents’ views, “Some of the playbags were a little too easy” (a lack of differentiation and challenge which recurs throughout the data set), two related to mouse, “Using mouse as an example or props all the time – thought it was irrelevant”. Other parents reported an overlap with things they were already doing, “The Bear Hunt. We already had the book”. [All quotations from 9]

### What parents found most useful

There were 81 comments coded under this heading; it is significant that of these, only one was negative, “Not a lot” (all quotations in this section are from [9]). All of the other comments refer in one way or another to increasing the support parents could offer to their children. Some referred to tackling difficult issues, “Helped with the time he should be on the tablet”, “Helped me handle his tantrums”. The majority, however, related generally to



parents' improved skills in supporting learning, "Learning strategies to help R"; "How to communicate with children using toys and books", "Gave us some ideas on how to do activities and things we could do"; "Shows you how to help them with math, problem solving".

A number of parents mentioned the value they placed on staff, as we have seen above about relationships between families and staff, "Very approachable teachers"; "Having someone explaining how to do or what to ask was very useful"; "The teachers on the project showed us exactly how to use it", as well as the value derived from relationships with other parents, "Chatting to others"; "...was nice to meet other parents". One parent also summed up, "It made my son more active and happy".

It is interesting to contrast the volume of comments in these two sections; parents were far more forthcoming about what they found to be useful about the project than what they disliked.

#### Parents' views of the Tip Sheets

Parents were asked how these sheets could be made better. Fifteen responses were received, of which 6 stated that no change was necessary, "Nothing for me all was good" [19]. Three comments again raised the issue of appropriate challenge for all children, "More challenging activities, some seemed a bit babyish" [19].

Comments from two parents demonstrate that not all families had grasped the fundamental basis of the PEN activities, "Completing them [the tip sheets] in class" and "If everything were done at school" [19]. However, as noted elsewhere, these discordant voices form a very, very small minority of the comments received.

#### How to improve workshops

There were nine comments from parents here. Two said that there was no improvement needed; two commented on the amount of paperwork – that it could be reduced or done in school rather than being taken home. One suggested that there could be more challenge in the activities, and two suggested that "more fun" should be added to the workshops (all from [9]).

#### Learning for the programme

There were eight comments from parents under this heading; most of these referred to a need for a more differentiated offer, "More flexible to each child, i.e. one project not fit all"; "I found it useful but a bit easy for my child so maybe have to different activities for the more

advanced”; “This was aimed at younger children – needs to be more flexible and more challenging” (all 9]), but it should be noted that these comments about improvement are still generally couched as improving something which is already good.

#### Summation of impacts for parents

Overall, it is clear from the data that parents in Phase Two of the PEN project were very satisfied, even very pleased with the PEN projects. They reported increased relationships with staff, and with other parents; their knowledge and self-efficacy in supporting learning was increased; they were able to provide better home learning environments for their children and they enjoyed the projects. There were very few negative comments, and these were usually too brief to allow an understanding of why the comments had been made, such as, in response to “What was useful about the workshops?” “Not a lot” [9]. There were no negative comments in interviews, to allow further explanation to be given.

One of the most interesting findings in this section was that so many parents reported that the programme led to them spending more time with their children and to an improved relationship with their children.

### **Impacts for Staff**

Staff reported a number of impacts of the programme; these will be reported under the headings of relationships with parents; knowledge of parents and confidence in working with parents. Overall, again, the comments were very favourable, with 9 settings reporting that they would recommend the project to other schools (and none reporting that they would not) [77].

#### Relationships with parents

There were 24 comments under this heading. These are perhaps best summed up by one member of staff who reported, “Staff felt that it [the project] had helped them to develop their relationships with disadvantaged families quite a bit” [1]. The quotation at the beginning of the phase two section also encapsulates much about this concept.

Another member of staff reported, “I enjoyed working with disadvantaged families, supporting them in learning. I got satisfaction when positive results were achieved” [1]. These comments were also echoed in [2,3,11 and 78]. All ten settings reported that they felt they had been working with the appropriate families [77].

Staff reported parents becoming “more approachable” and wanting to share work done at home with staff. Even in cases where staff were “already skilled at working with parents,

they had developed skills in engaging parents, running workshops and talking to parents about how to support learning at home” [1]. Another member of staff reported, “I’ve learned about the importance of building up a relationship with parents, the importance of “hands-on” workshops to engage parents, ‘teaching’ them how to have fun while they learn and the importance of parents talking to each other at workshops” [2].<sup>16</sup>

One setting member of staff summed up the difference the project had made to arguably already good practice, “The nursery engages parents with their play and stay and book club, but this has made us think about parental engagement throughout the school”.

Based on setting reports, which are at times fairly extensive, it would seem that the PEN project has had three main effects in this area. The first is the obvious bettering of relationships with/between families and staff. The second and third, although less obvious are at least as important and long lasting: a deepened staff understanding of parental engagement with children’s learning and increased capacity for staff to work with parents. These two combine to pave the way for longer term sustainability of the gains accrued from the PEN project.

#### Confidence and knowledge in/about working with parents

There were 56 comments under this heading, showing the high level of impact the PEN initiative had in this area. Many of the comments combine the two ideas, showing that staff’s increased confidence in supporting parents was at least partially based on a better understanding of families and their situations, “[I have] confidence to run a workshop and re-tell a story to adults. An understanding of how parents do not value the importance of storytelling”<sup>17</sup> [1]; “Improved my relationships with the parents. Understanding how busy their lives are” [1] “It has helped my confidence in talking with parents, I feel more sure about my abilities and about understanding how important parents are” [26].

There were a number of comments about staff learning in relation to the practical aspects of the programme, including around recruitment, “Parents with mental health issues were the most difficult to engage” [78], “Engage parents who will encourage others to attend” [78] and even, “To think carefully about which parents to involve” [78].

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<sup>16</sup> It is interesting that this member of staff chose to put ‘teaching’ in quotations in reference to parents.

<sup>17</sup> This comment should be juxtaposed with those from parents about what they have learned through the programme.

Other comments from staff connected the ideas of increased confidence with increased familiarity with parents, “ [I have] Become more confident to be able to engage parents. Getting to know parents” [1]1. “Talking to parents and finding out about their home and family. Finding ways to support them in a positive way” [1]. “I have gained skills in engaging parents in an informal, non-threatening way” [1].

Comments in this section show impacts for sustainability of the project work and increased capacity for staff, “Given me more confidence to do this next September” [1], “Feel like I would ‘hit the ground running’ at the start of September with workshops and activities” [1]. “I think I won’t be as nervous” [1].

One of the values of the programme, shown most clearly in this section but woven throughout much of the data, is this increased confidence among staff to engage with parents. Both literature and experience attest to the lack of training for staff in dealing with parents: in spite of a general acknowledgement of the value of parental engagement with children, it rarely features in teacher training, or does so only in a passing manner (see Discussion section). The training provided by the PEN programme thus fills a very real need for staff. This staff learning is summed up in Table 15, below; these answers come from [15].

*Table 15 What have you learned about engaging parents?*

<b>Concept learned</b>	<b>No. of times mentioned</b>
How much parents have going on at home	2
Using laughter and fun to relax them	2
Parents are busy/have other commitments	2
Important to use empathy, listen and give support.	2
Listen to parents’ ideas.	2
No pressure	2
Keep meetings informal	2
Engage earlier in the year	2
Use persistence, praise and encouragement	4
Keep meetings short	4

### What staff liked best

There were 13 comments from Phase 2 staff under this heading. Eight of these referred to the resources, “Activities, resources – we can use them again” [78]. Some comments referred to the training and support offered, “Training about running workshops about how they

[parents] can help their children at home” [4]; “Visits from Janet<sup>18</sup> to reassure us that we were following and completing the criteria needed” [16].

## Indicative charts from staff reports [15]

What follows is a series of charts, collated from staff reports about this phase of the PEN project.

*Table 16 Which parents were hardest to engage?*

<b>Grouping of parents</b>	<b>Number of times mentioned</b>
Working parents	3
Low confidence	3
Unmotivated / couldn't be bothered parents	2
Parents with younger children/babies	1
Parents with poor social skills	1
Parents with poor literacy skills	1
Parents with mental health problems	1
Parent's health issues	1
Disadvantaged parents	1
EAL parents / language	2

While it is difficult to make definitive statements on the basis of such small numbers, it is interesting that the only two categories to receive three responses to the question of which parents were hardest to engage were working parents and parents lacking in confidence. The second of these categories is particularly important, in view of the reports from both parents and staff that the project supported gains in parental confidence.

In Table 17, staff members report on what, with hindsight, might have been useful in engaging parents in the project. This table highlights the language issues that arose between staff and parents.

*Table 17 What could have been done differently to engage parents?*

<b>Action</b>	<b>Number of times mentioned</b>
Translated resources / translator	3
Not having children present for the whole session / a crèche	2
Home visits	1
More explanation /promotion or workshops	1
More clarity about how it would all be done	1
A more relaxing environment / smaller room/comfy chairs	1
More rewards?	1

<sup>18</sup> Janet and Emma are members of the PEN staff.

Staff were also asked about how they might change which groups of parents to involve in the project, reported in Table 18. Other than involving a wider group of parents (e.g. not just parents whose children are on the pupil premium list), there is little consensus about changes for the future. This chart raises an interesting issues about diversity among participating families, as the change most often suggested by staff was the inclusion of families not on the pupil premium register.

*Table 18 How would you change who was involved in the future?*

<b>Grouping of parents</b>	<b># of times chosen</b>
Invite non PPG families too.	4
Not include parents with poor confidence.	2
Not include EAL parents unless we had a translator.	2
Invite more parents.	2
Use with new families	2
Make more effort to persuade disadvantaged parents to be involved.	2
Shorter period of time.	2
Start with PP/hard to reach before rolling out to other families.	2
Target parents not involved with their children's education.	2
Wait to see which families would benefit most from the project.	2
Include a couple of enthusiastic, easy-to-engage parents for others to bounce off.	2

From Table 19, it is clear that staff agreed with the number of workshops offered to parents

*Table 19 Number of workshops*

<b>Too many</b>	<b>Too few</b>	<b>Just right</b>
1		8

Table 20 records what staff felt were the most useful parts of the workshops for families. It is interesting to note that, in general, the active activities were rated more highly and more so than merely “telling parents” what happens in nursery. This argues a move away from a model of information-transfer, to a model of working together with parents, or working alongside parents.

Again with such small numbers it is nest not to generalise, but it is indicative that “modelling” received only two mentions as something that worked best in workshops. This may again point to a move away from showing parents what to do, to involving them.

Table 20 What worked best in workshops?

Workshop	Number of times mentioned
Initial workshop / Dough disco	4
Active, exciting simple resources	4
FUN activities	4
Playdough	4
Letter/number walk	2
Practical activities	2
Modelling activities	2
Having activities set up as they arrived	2
Having the library to work in	2
Shape walk workshop	2
Quick fun sessions in the morning.	2
Showing parents what activities we do in Nursery.	2
Informal adult-only start with a chance to chat.	2

Table 21 presents data on the changes staff suggest for the future or what they have learned during this presentation of the project. Two concepts receive four votes each, the first of these is to advertise the project better, or give parents more notice of events, and the second is to have child free workshops.

It is difficult to connect these two, but perhaps they point to an acknowledgement that parents' lives and learning extend beyond the setting or school. (See the Discussion section for more on this idea); this suggestion is bolstered by staff mentioning in various places an increased awareness of the realities of parents' lives and home situations.

Table 21 Learning and future changes to workshops

Advertise better / give more notice	4
Younger siblings could be distracting	2
Engage parents who will encourage others to attend.	2
To think carefully about which parents to involve.	2
Would do maths earlier as too easy for spring term.	2
Timing. Maybe in Nursery Class time rather than at end of sessions.	2
Resources provided.	2
Better for parent and child involved together	2
Change the order of the workshops	2
Don't overload parents	2
Make it interesting	2
Be more organised	2
Difficult to do alone, you need the help of another person.	2
Child free workshops.	4
Different location	2
Don't rush	2

Table 22 shows that staff were very willing to support parents, even if they could not attend workshops in the setting. This would argue that both staff and parents saw value in, and made time for, these conversations.

*Table 22 Support given to parents who could not attend workshops*

Short chat if they had missed the workshop.	10
Delivered a workshop to one parent who couldn't attend meetings.	2
Explained activities 1:1 before school.	2
Quick chat at the end of the day and to give resources.	2
4/10 families received extra support whenever needed.	2

Table 23 reports on staff evaluations of the various activities in this phase of the PEN project. The first column reports on the activity, the second, on the number of staff who reported using the activities, the third, the number and percentage of staff who would use this activities again. The final column reports free text comments from staff.

The three most highly rated activities were the “cress monster”, making a sunflower and the reading challenge. It is interesting that in two of these- the cress monster and the reading challenge – staff reported impacts other than enjoyment. The cress monster activities elicited “lots of language” from children and the reading challenge led to parental reports of increased reading.

Ten of the free text comments mention enjoyment or fun, echoing a common theme.

It is also clear that not all settings had similar experiences even when undertaking the same activities. For example, the two comment on the introductory workshop seem to contradict one another. It is not surprising that such difference should occur, as each setting, and each group of parents is different, highlighting again the need for contextualisation of any implementation of the projects discussed here.



Table 23 Staff comments on Phase 2 resources

Resource -activity	Did you use it? (out of 10)	Would you do it again?	How good was the design? used <sup>19</sup>	Any comments
Intro workshop	9	7 (78%)	n/a	Too long. Really enjoyed
Playclub workshop	5	5 (100%)	n/a	
Numeracy mini 1	6	4 (67%)	n/a	Difficult to engage parents in maths workshops. Make harder or swap to Autumn. Parents and children enjoyed it. Poor attendance. Difficult to get parents in.
Numeracy mini 2	5	2 (40%)	n/a	Make harder or swap to Autumn. Successful number hunt workshop.
Numeracy 3	3	1 (33%)	n/a	Make harder or swap to Autumn.
Summer 1	4	3 (75%)	n/a	
Summer 2	3	1 (33%)	n/a	
Summer 3	5	3 (60%)	n/a	
Cress monster	5	2 (40%)	4.6	Would like a Face template. Planted a sunflower. Difficult to get cress seeds Lots of language from children.
Making a sunflower	5	3 (60%)	4.6	Provide resources
Reading challenge	8	5 (63%)	4.6	Too close to singing challenge (similar). Parents said they read more. All nursery children involved.
Songs and rhymes	5	3 (60%)	4.4	

<sup>19</sup> Average score for those who reporting using the resource

Talking	5	5 (100%)	4.4	Useful for parents
Number walk	8	3 (38%)	4.4	Make it harder (up to 20) or swap to autumn.
Mark making	5	4 (80%)	4.4	
Playclub bags	9	7 (78%)	4.3	Some were quite simple. Children enjoyed. Difficult for the parents to follow. Children loved taking these home.
Shapes	9	4 (44%)	4.3	Make them harder (3D shapes) or swap to autumn. The game was brilliant.
Shape walk	8	3 (38%)	4.3	Make them harder (3D shapes) or swap to autumn. Within the room. Children enjoyed.
Pattern – socks	8	4 (50%)	4.3	Make harder or swap to Autumn.
Get active	9	5 (56%)	4.3	Make harder or swap to Autumn. Fun making mum and dad jump. Sheet helped us to know who had completed activity.
Number game	8	3 (38%)	4.3	Make it harder (up to 20)
Playdough	9	7 (78%)	4.2	Parents enjoyed. Great fun, parents didn't realise how important playdough is.
Counting	9	4 (44%)	4.2	Make it harder (up to 20) or swap to autumn.
Singing challenge	5	2 (40%)	4.2	Too close to reading challenge (similar).
Screen time	7	7 (100%)	4	Useful for parents
Going out	9	3 (33%)	3.7	Great weather /good attendance. Parents loved these. I altered it as not very relevant.
Where's mouse?	7	3 (43%)	3.4	More book like! Children really enjoyed.
Sharing a book	6	5 (83%)	3.4	
Toilet training	3	3 (100%)	3	
Routines	4	4 (100%)	2.5	Bedtime chart very helpful.
Starting school	2	2 (100%)	2	

Not everything in projects goes according to plan; Table 24 reports issues staff found surprising during this phase. It may show the need for the reported improvements in relationships between parents and staff, that staff reported being surprised most often by positive feedback from parents.

*Table 24 What surprised staff during project*

Positive feedback from parents.	4
How many dads got involved	2
Unexpected families showing interest.	2
Mary's dad kept coming to the meetings and showing excellent involvement.	2
How little parents do with their children at home	2
Parents lack of understanding about how to help their children.	2
How parents stayed throughout the different projects.	2
Parent confided useful information relating to their child.	2

Table 25 highlights an issue which runs throughout the data, the need for materials which provide greater challenge for students.

*Table 25 What staff would like in future from the programme*

Harder maths activities.	14
Resources in dual language for EAL parents.	2

As with parents and children, the overwhelming impression from the data is that staff found the programme useful, for themselves, for the children in their care, and for the families of those children. Staff appreciated the resources provided as well as the training and support from the PEN staff. Staff were clear that the projects had made a positive difference to children.

## **Summation of Phase Two**

Overall, parents and staff reported high levels of satisfaction with Phase 2 of the PEN project. Children were reported to have increased progress, and particularly to have increased confidence and to have enjoyed the project.

In terms of what might improve the project, the main issue which arose was that of offering more challenge in some of the materials, for children who found the current ones too easy.

## Phase Three

There were 59 documents in this phase; all of these documents come from staff involved in the project, and therefore reflect staff experiences and perceptions. These will be reported under the headings of impacts for staff parents, and children.

### Impacts for staff

#### Staff confidence in working with parents

There were 33 comments coded under this heading, again all positive, relating increased confidence and skills among staff for working with parents. Some comments were quite simple, “Gained skills and confidence” [23] and “increased skills” and “increased confidence” [both 22].

Others elaborated, allowing more analysis, “Learned the different positive ways to engage parents” [40]. This is echoed by another member of staff, “Gained confidence in talking and helping parents. Realised the important for parents to meet early on” [29]. “Important to engage parents early in their children’s learning journey” [36]. Another commented that they had “learn[ed] how to adapt myself and approaches which work well when engaging disadvantaged families” [24].

These comments, which are echoed by many others, show that staff have come some way in their knowledge and confidence in how to support parents but, perhaps even more importantly, in why this is an important task to undertake. “It has helped my confidence in talking with parents. I feel more sure about my abilities and an understanding of how important parents are” [22].

Other staff members commented on learning what works in parental engagement interventions, a theme to which we will return, “A structured, targeted approach is a valuable tool” [40]; “I have learnt to pick up on what issues parents might be having” [34], which comes from “Getting to know the parents and developing parental links” [20]. Others continued, “Talking to parents – making them feel valued in being able to contribute to their child’s learning” [36], which is also based on a staff recognition of the “value of engaging parents and supporting them in helping their children learning and settling into school” [16]. These comments show a growing understanding of the value of parental engagement with children’s learning among staff.

### What staff have learned about engaging parents.

This section reports on comments from staff about learning to be taken forward to future presentations of PEN work.

There were a great many comments under this heading, reflecting the nature of the data, which came mainly from staff surveys and reports. These data will be reported under the subheadings of what staff found most useful (and, under this, the value of working with other staff), what staff liked best about the programme, challenges they experienced, (and under this, budgetary and time keeping issues). These sections then lead on to further sections of how staff plan to disseminate the good work of the project, what they would suggest changing about the training provided, and what they would like from the team in the future, including a second on the videos that staff would find most useful. This is then followed by comments on how having taken part in the project will impact on future engagements with parents.

### Relationships with parents

There were 18 comments under this heading. Many of these were answers to “What have you learned”? for example, “Talking to parents, making them feel valued in being able to contribute to their child’s learning” [36], and “involving parents successfully within the nursery, not just tokenistic” [18]. This comment shows a movement on the part of staff toward understanding of the nature and value of parental engagement with learning.

Other members of staff noted relationships with parents as something they had enjoyed, “Getting to know parents on a personal level” [16], or as part of their biggest success in the programme, “Building a positive relationship before our families start in September” [42]. Still others reported, “Talking/having open dialogue with staff and parents I found very beneficial” [21]. These relationships at times led to a better understanding of parents, “How vulnerable some parents are” [21].

### What staff found most useful

There were seven general comments under this heading, with others being reported under the headings of timing, structure, FUN activities, resources and the importance of sharing with other staff, (including support from the PEN team, Emma and Janet). Overall, there were 95 comments coded under this heading.

There were seven comments which did not fit under the other headings had no common theme.

### *Timing*

There were ten comments which related to issues around timing. Some of these referenced how often events should optimally be held, “one workshop every half term” [56], “running groups every week for a period of time” [85]; there was no consensus about timing of events, showing the need to adapt programmes to individual settings. Other members of staff referenced issues of timing within events, “Having a quick circle time and then allow parent and child free time” [69].

### *Structure*

Four respondents mentioned issues to do with structure as the best part of the PEN project, either simply by reporting, “the structure” [23 and 19] or reporting that they valued that the programme was designed for nursery, not foundation stage [29 and 17].

### *FUN activities*

Seven respondents reported that the FUN activities were the best part of the programme. None of these comments, however, elaborated on why this was the case.

### *Resources*

There were 35 comments referencing resources as the best or most useful part of the programme; 15 of these related to the Playclub bags. Most of the comments were again fairly descriptive, “The resources” [16 and 33]. Some comments gave more explanations, “Playdough activities were amazing. They [parents and children] liked throwing and timing practical activities – best feedback from parents on those” [85], and “The play dough really helped the parents get involved during the workshops and the expectation that they needed to” [61]. These comments seem to indicate that what staff valued about the resources was their use in engaging parents in activities.

### *Sharing with other schools*

There were 8 comments under this heading. Most of these comments were quite short, cf, “showing sharing experiences” [19] and “sharing good practice” [22]. One comment elaborated, “The ideas and activities from other schools and also from Janet and Emma. Also Janet attending some of the groups” [25]. Perhaps this section is best summed up by the comment, “Sharing good practice when it became a bit tricky – supportive” [22].

## Future Plans

“It was a very effective project with great benefits for the parents and carers involved. We will continue to use the strategies and resources” [78]

There were 23 comments about continuing the project into the next year; all of these were positive and many enthusiastic. One comment related why staff felt able to continue this work, “I will definitely take forward plans to run termly workshops in the future due to increased confidence” [1]. Many comments showed a desire to widen the pool of families involved, “I will try the bags etc. during play & stay with as many parents as possible” [1]; “Start much earlier in the year, start with the disadvantaged families but also include the other families in nursery” [1], and to embed the practices, “Make the activity/mouse etc. part of the learning in Nursery every day” [1]; “We’re just really happy with the impact that it’s had, which is why we’ve carried on with it this year and we’d like to open it up to more parents, and it’s also why we’ve decided to participate in the mouse club as well, transition, and try and get children school-ready” [36]. One Headteacher summed up, “It was a very effective project with great benefits for the parents and careers involved. We will continue to use the strategies and resources” [78].

These comments argue that the practices involved in this phase of the project have become embedded within settings. These practices would seem then to be sustainable, at least partially due to the increased confidence of staff in working with parents. This increased confidence also signals greater capacity with the settings for working with parents and families.

### What ongoing support would staff like from the PEN team?

There were seven comments under this heading, three of these referred to videos that would be useful. Three of the four comments not about videos were requests for “continued contact” [41] with the PEN team, with another requesting an online resource for parents and children.

Two of the video requests related to videos of workshops [23 and 22] and the final one asked for videos of interactions between parents and staff [ 31].

What follows is a series of charts taken from staff feedback. While responses are often expressed as percentages, these are given for the purposes of comparison. The numbers

responding are very low (due to the numbers of staff involved) and therefore percentages should be seen as indicative rather than definitive.

Table 26 and Table 27 show staff views of the usefulness of the training and the amount of training offered. It is clear that staff valued the training they received in this project.

*Table 26 How useful was the training? [16]*

<b>Not useful</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>Very useful</b>
				6 (37.5%)	8 (50%)	2 (12.5%)

*Table 27 Comment on amount of training [16]*

<b>Too little</b>	<b>Too much</b>	<b>Just right</b>
	3 (20%)	12 (80%)

There were 15 free text responses to the question of what practitioners would change about the training involved in PEN, in Table 28. Seven of these, just under half, relate to issues of preparation, such as having resources and information readily available early on in the project. Two suggest changes to the order of activities and two build on the value of working with other practitioners.

*Table 28 What would you change about future training [16]*

Sort packs out at the training to be properly prepared.
Change rota of activities e.g. FUN First, playbags last.
Take scores of the questionnaires for parents
Fun activity sheets already prepared
Begin earlier. Give staff all information of what is to come so then able to prepare parents for work involved and to tell it's a whole year project. (some parents thought it would end after playbags).
More time to share experiences to support each other through the project.
Link up more with other schools involved
A folder with all sections/notes rather than emails
Less Paperwork
Make sure the resources are ready for the next time. Make some of the resources more challenging.
Ta's to come as well
Less evaluation for parents – simplified forms.
Swap around the activities – start with the simple FUN and then work up to the Playclub at the end of the project.”
Give a brief overview of the whole project so that staff and parents are prepared for the next set of activities



To provide parents with more information at the beginning so they know what to expect and the length of time it will take to complete.

It is interesting that in Table 29, the most requested extra resource was video clips of staff running workshops, and that the second was about giving staff the opportunity to practice running workshops themselves. This would argue for the value of modelling for staff.

*Table 29 What else would be useful to help staff do the project? [16]*

Other – opportunity to deliver more challenging activities if needed.	1 (6%)
Other – Maybe observe other schools running workshops	1 (6%)
Other – Resources already organised	2 (12%)
More one to one support	3 (18%)
Opportunity to practice running workshops	7 (41%)
Video clips of other practitioners	12 (71%)

Table 30 shows that staff felt their skills developed particularly in running workshops and, significantly, in supporting parents to support our of school learning.

*Table 30 Where have you developed skills? [16]*

	No				A lot
	1	2	3	4	5
Engaging parents			1 (6%)	7 (44%)	8 (50%)
Running workshops			2 (12.5%)	10 (62.5%)	4 (25%)
Supporting disadvantaged families		1(6%)	4 (25%)	8 (50%)	3 (19%)
Talking to parents about how to support learning at home				10 (62.5%)	6 (37.5%)

## Impacts for Parents

### Parental Self-efficacy, Confidence

There were 24 comments coded under this heading (it will be remembered that all documents in this phase came from staff, so these are staff reports of changes observed in parents).

Most of these comments simply report changes in parents' confidence, "Z's mum: confidence to talk about her child's learning and deal with child's behaviour at home" [48]. The theme of parents' self-efficacy leading to changes at home is echoed by other members of staff, with

the changes to the home learning environment leading to better outcomes for children, “A nursery child... never did her reading at home. Mom thoroughly enjoyed the workshops, became more engaged as the year went on” [60], echoed in [76] for another mother and child. These outcomes seemed to be based on having, “Happy, confident parents that want to talk about children’s learning” [21]. It is interesting to note that a number of these comments link enjoyment/happiness with parental self-efficacy and confidence.

#### Parents’ Knowledge

There were 12 comments from staff about increases in parental knowledge, relating to parenting “learn[ing] how to help their child” [70]. This arises from parents understanding “more about nursery education” [52], which results in raised expectations from parents, and more awareness of the expectations on of their children’s learning [54, 55, 58].

#### Parental Enjoyment

There were six comments under this heading. One member of staff reported that parents “have enjoyed it and feel it was a worthwhile project” [46]. There were again links between enjoyment, knowledge and self-efficacy, “Parents were saying they enjoyed spending more time with their child, and felt more sure how to help” [76]. Although this is a short comment, it speaks to the heart of the project, which was to increase parents’ ability to support learning.

#### Relationships with other parents

There were seven comments under this heading.. There was one less than positive comment, that “parents still feel they don’t always interact with each other” [54], and one suggestion that “more time for workshops” would have improved these interactions [76]. This was, however, offset by other comments, such as, “A cluster of mums within the project became very close and would encourage each other to come along to things and have become parent champions” [28]. The project directly supported such interactions, as it had “given parents the confidence to talk to each other” [48, also echoed in another, individual example from this setting]. The wider benefits of these friendships was noted by another member of staff, “families have made good friendships. They have Eid parties together and take trips to the park” [42].

#### Relationship with school/setting staff

There were eight comments under this heading, all of which were positive, such as examples of the differences seen in parents by staff, “The cooperation of parents on issues we have with children at school” [65]. These increased relationships with staff can be fostered by

flexibility on the part of settings, “we have a coffee afternoon which suited some of our parents” [43] and “Talking to parents more regularly, not only about learning” [48], and “sharing humour with parents” [58]. Staff also reported increased engagement among parents who had not previously engaged with the school [67]. These comments again show that staff have become more comfortable working with parents, using the increased skills noted above.

### Impacts on the Home Learning Environment

There were only five comments under this heading, but it is worth noting that they were all positive. The comments linked different concepts, such as confidence and support for the home learning environment, “E’s mum – more open, trust, more confidence in spoken English, works more with child at home” [48], or knowledge, enjoyment and the home learning environment, “Parents were saying they enjoyed spending more time with their child, and felt more sure of how to help” [76]. There was also a link made to the concept of modelling, “We demonstrated how to use resources. Most families said this helped them greatly” [44].

### All family members

There were 11 comments under this heading, three of which specifically reference paternal involvement. Sometimes other family members are mentioned as supporting agents, “Y’s mum mentioned she had a new baby, Dad and Auntie had been pitching in with activities” [28]. Others reported the involvement of other family members, “One family understood how important older siblings could help with understanding how to complete playbags, FUN activities. Most families include younger siblings in home activities” [48]. For at least some families, the changes to the home learning environment benefit a wider group of people than the targeted child.

## **Impacts for Children**

### Confidence

There were seven comments coded under this heading. These comments from staff report perceived increases in children’s confidence, sometimes links to progress in other areas, “E has improved in confidence and does very well academically” [76]. Members of staff also linked increased parental confidence with increased children’s confidence [76, in relation to two children]. Staff also reported that parents had noticed increased confidence in their children [46].

### Children's progress

There were thirteen comments from staff relating to children's progress, all of them positive. Staff reported noting that "children who are doing more at home are more ready for activities in school" [70]. Parents were also reported to have noticed that their children are now ready for school [55]. Other members of staff reported, "significant accelerated learning for most PEN children in speaking, reading and number" [46], including the case of an individual child, "R can sing silly soup – began nursery with no speech" [46]. Another reported, "Children were ready, i.e. toilet trained, happy to show Mouse to their teacher" [43].

### Challenges faced

Nine of the comments about challenges faced in the project related to administrative issues, and three of these related to "keeping track of playbags and resources" [18]. Two others referred to the need for "translating forms so parents can give feedback" [18], (which may highlight an implicit assumption that most/all parents taking part in the programme have sufficient English to fill in these forms).

Nine comments referenced issues around time; "Fitting times in with a normal school day" [30]; "Time has been difficult to manage. Needing more time and staff for managing and organisation of the project" [16]. One comment linked these two sections together, "Time management for the admin and data" [24]. These comments need to be seen in the light of the overwhelmingly positive responses to other questions, and thus as suggestions for improving a good programme.

### *Costs*

It is interesting, in view of the financial pressures on schools and settings, that there were only four comments coded under this heading, relating to budget implications. One respondent pointed out that as "a large school, it multiplies the resources needed" [37]. This comment is interesting, as it seems to imply that future iterations of the PEN projects would include all children, at least in a given class. We have seen settings making this suggestion above. The small number of comments coded under this heading does not necessarily imply that schools are not facing issues with cost but may imply that staff see the value of the programme as outweighing such factors.

### What to change about the training

There were eight comments coded under this heading. There was no consensus in these comments, which ranged from "No role play" [26]. This comment needs to be seen in the

light of other, positive comments about the value of roleplay in training, however. to a comment about the location of the training being too far from respondent's base [29] to the need to engage "more staff members involved to work as a bigger team" [23]. Another commented that it would be useful to have a "little more time to discuss with other practitioners, as useful to see what other people do" [17]. This links with the section above about the value placed on sharing practice.

It is interesting that there are so few comments in this section and that none of the, other than the one comment about role play, refer to the content of the training itself.

### **Summation of Phase Three**

All of the documents in Phase 3 come from staff, which is reflected in their greater concentration on outcomes for practitioners.

It is clear that overall, staff found the Phase 3 project useful. They reported increases in their own skills, as well as beneficial outcomes for parents and children. Staff valued the training they received, particularly the change to interact with other practitioners, including the PEN team.

## **Phase Four**

Items from this phase will be reported under five main headings: Impacts for parents, Impacts for Children, Impacts for Staff, Learning for the Programme and Future Action. Documents providing data in this section include final reports from settings, a staff feedback session, staff and parent questionnaires and other forms from staff.

### **Impacts for parents**

This section will be reported under six headings, Parental engagement and enjoyment, Self-Efficacy, Knowledge, Parents' relationships with each other and Impacts on the Home Learning Environment.

#### Parental Engagement and Enjoyment

There were 25 comments coded under this heading, all of them positive. This section is perhaps best summed by the simple comment, "This is a great idea, please continue" [96], echoed by a member of staff reporting, "All parents said that they had enjoyed the activities" [100]. A parent reported, "I found this project fun, interesting and enjoyable" [96].

Some of the comments expanded on what it was that parents had enjoyed, "The bags were a lot of fun" [96]; "We liked the ping pong ball game...the best" [96]. A member of staff commented, "Parents like to learn ways to engage children. Parents have enjoyed the social aspect, and spending time in school with their children" [100], which was supported by a parent who stated, "I absolutely loved having the opportunity to come into school and enjoy learning and lots of fun" [96].

This enjoyment supported parents' engagement in the project, with staff reporting on individual cases, such as, "A parent who didn't attend first parents' evening is more engaged through coming to workshops" [100], and, "A's mum is totally on board with Mouse club" [100].

It is worth noting that staff actively supported parents to gain this engagement. All of the following were in answer to the question, "What was your biggest success in engaging a parent, and what did you do that helped to engage them?":

"Engaging a parent who was extremely shy and could hardly make eye contact at the beginning of the programme, I spoke to the parent every morning and asked how the home activities were going" [100].

“Being able to support a parent who attended the group when she was going through a difficult marital break up and keeping her engaged, mutual trust and confidence to talk openly” [100]

“Separated parents wanted different times for workshops – through informality and seeing how practical the sessions were they felt comfortable and began to attend together” [100]

Again in this section, we can see that both practitioners and parents link the concepts of enjoyment and engagement.

### Parental Self-Efficacy

There were 17 comments under this heading. Two of them, when juxtaposed, show the impact of the Phase 4 work very clearly:

(In answer to, “Did anything surprise you?”) “How low self-esteem and confidence stopped the parents from enjoying and joining in the activities”

(In answer to “Give an example of where you have seen a difference”) “Parents’ confidence improved to work with their child”  
[both from 100]

These comments are echoed over many times by staff: “One Parent at the start of the year was very shy and not willing to engage with staff. After attending workshops now feels/looks at ease and able to interact with staff and other parents” [100]; “Another parent whose confidence with the school has developed greatly”; it is important to note the impact this has had, as the comment continues, “which has also had a huge impact on her son’s confidence” [100]. In another case, “A dad with significant anxieties, engaged in every workshop including during a time when a new baby was born into the family” [100], showing that even during a time of potential familial stress, this parent was able to continue to engage with the project.

### Knowledge

There were 14 comments coded under this heading.

Comments from parents show the benefit for them and their children from the programme, “Getting to know teachers, what is learned in school, seeing how their child learns” [100]; “I felt much happier about leaving my child at nursery after having a chance to come in and

look around and know the staff and that she is safe here” [94], and from the same source, “Things have now changed and expectations are a lot higher, made me a lot more aware of what he needs to learn at school”. And from another parent, “Showed me different ways to go about teaching different things. Helped me to be aware of what G was learning at school” [96].

Comments from staff show that they, too, have observed beneficial changes to parents’ knowledge and action on that knowledge, “A new parent to school and the area did everything for her child (overbearing). Now gives the right amount of support, knows when to step back or step up. Is a valued parent helper in class and is keen to become a TA. Mouse Club helped to see what L could do”. [100].

#### Parents’ relationships with each other

There were 19 comments in this section; one comment from a member of staff reported that they had not made this a priority this year, and one commented that “ We didn’t tend to get parents talking as they interacted with their child more” [100]. It is worth noting that another setting tried to make sure parents had time to talk, “The parents were left to chat for five mins after every workshop to encourage making friendships” [100], but all other comments were positive. It would seem that the activities supported parental interaction, “Parents involved found it easier to talk to each other” [100], and sometimes this was initiated by parents themselves, “One parent was confident enough to take the lead in terms of conversation, which helped support other parents” [100].

There were benefits for parents and children from parental interaction, “I got to meet new parents and got to find out new techniques to help my child learn” [96]; “Parents get to know each other really well and this improved attendance. They regularly talked to each other about their children and shared tips” [100], “Parents sharing reading books” [100]

#### Impacts on the Home Learning Environment

There were 26 comments coded under this heading.

Staff often reported changes and improvements in the home learning environment, to the benefit of the children in the project, “Noticed in reading record parents are reading more often with child” [100]; “One parent fully engaged in the workshops and sending evidence to school. Had an impact on home/school relationship and child’s learning” [100]; “One parent noticed their child struggled with number recognition so said she would focus on this at home. This helped the child in school” [100].



This engagement at home was actively supported by staff, “Parent going through a very messy separation in her relationship but still came to the workshops alone. She felt comfortable with the TA’s and able to carry on the home activities with the child” [100]; this argues that the relationship between the parent and the setting staff supported the parents’ work at home.

As in previous sections, there is evidence that participation in the project led to changes in the beneficial interactions between parents and children, (parents reported): “Interacted more as a family” [100]. “One parent said it was good as they often already knew how to do the activities they were being asked to do with their child but until the project were not necessarily doing them...” [94]. “All learning skills – reading, counting, colours, basic maths skills improved. We as a family helped K with activities and spent quality time together” [96]. “I feel because I have seen that L enjoys more 1:1 time, I sit down with her more doing activities like writing, maths or songs” [96].

## **Learning for the Programme**

There is a wide variety of comments coded under this heading; they are drawn together by the fact that they have information that can be used to make the programme better in the future.

### Challenges

There were 28 comments coded under this heading. Four of these comments referred to staffing issues, such as “A member of staff being moved” as a challenge, for example [83]. Another comment related to a theme seen above about staff learning, “Overcoming initial fear of facing parents” [83].

Nine comments related to challenges concerning parents; seven of these referenced issues to do with “Trying to engage some parents” [83], and issues around retention, “Maintaining numbers on a weekly basis” [83].

Seven comments related to issues around the paperwork involved in the project, “Finding time to fill in paperwork, get parents’ forms back” [83], “collecting evaluation forms and questions” [83], and “filling in the evaluation forms” [100]. It is interesting that none of these comments relate to difficulties with the content of the programme.

### Which parents were hardest to engage?

There were 11 comments in response to this question. Only one of these mentioned “Parents who have little English” [100] or any other language issue. Four other comments made reference to issues outside of the project, such as “Busy parents and “Working parents”

[100]; as another practitioner pointed out, “They [parents] thought personal reasons had prevented them from attending sometimes, they did not feel anything to do with the workshops stopped them attending” [94].

#### What would staff change about the programme

Staff were asked what they would change about the programme and its training. There were 24 comments here.

Two of these comments said that it would be useful to “Reduce paperwork” [83]; it is interesting to note that, while staff clearly found the paperwork involved time consuming (see other sections), they did not concentrate on this aspect of the programme.

Other comments related to how staff would have changed their engagement with parents, such as using “Personal reminders, texts, run some Mouse Club after school sessions” [100] and “Be more persuasive because the parents would have enjoyed the workshops if they had attended” [100].

There were ten comments which mentioned changes in resources. Some comments were about fairly minor matters, “Spelling and font!” [100]. Other comments made reference to the need for greater challenge in some of the resources, “Some activities [in Mouse Club] were pitched too low for Reception children” but this staff member goes on to praise the project, “Practical activities were popular, playbags were amazing” [100].

Staff made 12 mentions of changes to the groups of parents they would involve in the programme. Nine of these comments suggested more careful targeting in the future, often on the basis of better knowledge, “Maybe get to know parents first” [100], “Target specific groups but open to all” [100]. Another member of staff suggested, “Would have a better balance of families; some selected families’ needs were too great” [100].

Staff were also asked what they would change about the training they had received; there were five responses to this question, one of which said, “nothing, very informative, all questions answered and support given” [83], leaving only four suggestions about training in the future. These comments included again a plea for a reduction in the “number of handouts” [83], or for “less worksheet style activities, more hands on” [83].

Five members of staff also responded to a question asking what would discourage them from involvement in the programme in the future. Two of these responses highlighted the fact that settings could reproduce the concepts involved with their own resources, “Would make our own maths activities” [100] and “We plan to make up more playbags of our own, so we can

have 20 in rotation for each child” [100]. One respondent mentioned “The costing for resources for all the cohort” [100]. Only one member of staff mentioned anything embedded in the project as a reason not to continue, “Children did not respond to Mouse” [100]<sup>20</sup>.

Aligned to these comments, staff also gave ideas about what would be helpful to add to the programme. Three of these were requests for videoed support, two of workshops and one specifically around Mouse Club. Linked to this concept, another practitioner asked for “opportunities to network online” [83]; this clearly resonates with the value of interaction with other practitioners, highlighted by staff above. Three other comments suggested that additional or different resources for the Maths bags (FUN activities) would be useful.

### Learning about Resources

Practitioners made a great many comments about resources, particularly those involved in mouse Club. There were 13 comments relation to challenges or issues with Mouse Club (but far more referencing positive aspects, see below). Some of these issues concerned the actual Mouse, “Lost Mouse” [100]; “Children mixing mice up, taking the wrong one home, causing arguments” [100]. Four settings reported that “Children enjoyed having them [Mouse] for the first few weeks but feedback from parents stated that they then lost interest” [100].

In contrast, there were 27 positive comments about Mouse, and the Mouse Club project. Many of these concern how children used or related to Mouse itself. The variety in these comments makes them worth sharing at some length:

“Mouse now has a name “Charlie” and an outfit. We celebrated Charlie’s birthday!” [96]

“IJ took it swimming and kickboxing” [100]

“K made a bed and covers for his Mouse which he proudly took to school. He said it was his pet and he had to look after it.” [96]

“L still sleeps in bed with her mouse. She sings the Mouse ran up the clock before she gets in bed.” [96]

“B uses her mouse for everything from helping to settle her sister to reading to it.” [96]

“She still has mouse on her shelf and knows it’s her nursery mouse. It’s a nice memory.” [93]

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<sup>20</sup> But note positive comments about Mouse from staff and parents, below.

“Mouse helps with things like getting dressed, as he used to watch him get dressed - then he wants to get dressed.” [93]

“Mouse is a great idea – she was out yesterday – she was a superhero – THAT’S THE GREAT THING ABOUT MOUSE – can go anywhere and do anything.” [96] (caps in the original comment)

“Mouse helped a lot with activities and helped C relate to school.” [96]

These comments show clearly that, while there were some teething issues (such as the need for labels to tell mice apart), overall the Mouse project seems to have accomplished one of its aims, of ensuring a smooth transition between home and setting, and helping children to settle once there, saying that mouse “encouraged a smooth transition” [100] and “She liked to bring it to school and it helped her come. She asked for it” [93]. The fact that some children lost interest in Mouse as time went on could be seen as another marker of successful transition, in that the transitional object was no longer needed.

### Playbags

There were, in contrast, only seven comment which mentioned playbags. All of these comments were positive, “They [parents] thought the play club bags were great, as they had all the instructions in” [94]. “They [parents] particularly enjoyed the play club bags as they had the CD with all the songs on, this made it easy to sing along and they could sing the songs at other times, such as in the car” [94]. These aspects of the bags will support the home learning environment as parents will have access to information to support their work with their children. In one setting, “Parents said they would like a copy of the CD” [94].

Although there were fewer comments here, it is still clear in the comments that exist that, for the families mentioned, the play club bags supported the connections between home and school/setting.

### Support from Senior Leaders

Staff made seven comments in response to a question about what support could be offered by senior leaders; four of these refer to the previously mentioned issue of staff time, cf “Funding and planning time” [100], and “Ensure staff are giving enough time, to prepare, plan, etc.” [100]. Three comments mention funding, including provision of “Refreshments for parents and a small budget for materials” [100].

## **Future Action**

Staff reported on how they would take the work of the PEN project forward. Throughout, the value staff placed on the project was clear, “We feel all parents should have the opportunity to take part, therefore budgets need to be planned to ensure we have enough resources” [86]. Other settings hoped to continue their work as children moved on, “We are keen to carry on running workshops as children move into reception” [93]; “Parents have already met with Y1 staff through a tea party workshop. There is already a workshop planned to be delivered by Y1 in the autumn with more in the pipeline” [86]; “We will discuss continuing Mouse Club in Year 1, targeting specific children who we didn’t reach this year” [87].

When asked what they would use next year, staff mentioned the tip sheets (mentioned three times), play club bags (five times). Perhaps the most important comment was, “Playclub. Notion of Parent engagement” [100].

Staff were also asked how they would disseminate the work and success they had so far in the project; there were 10 responses to this question. Five staff mentioned publishing their work on the setting website; one mentioned a Facebook page [99]. One setting mentioned reporting to the full governing body. Other respondents reported that they would share their work with other staff at staff meetings [86] or in the training of new staff [87].

## **Summation, Phase 4**

This phase, along with the previous two, seems to have had beneficial outcomes for parents, children and members of staff. Staff members gained insights into parents’ lives and skills in supporting them, and parents were more able to support learning in the home.

## Discussion: The Parental Engagement Fund Projects – Key Themes

This short discussion section will show how the results from this research on the REAL and PEN programmes integrates with and adds to, the current literature.

The value of parental engagement with children's learning is well known and widely discussed in the literature (Fan and Chen 2001, Desforges and Abouchaar 2003, Sylva, Melhuish et al. 2008, Sylva, Scott et al. 2008, Goodall and Vorhaus 2011, Jeynes 2012). These projects build on that literature, putting into place many of its findings.

Key terms should be made clear at the outset of this discussion.

**“Parents”** should be understood to encompass any adult with a significant caring responsibility for the child. It is vital, particularly in view of some of the findings in these projects, to acknowledge that this term applies to male as well as to female carers. This is all the more important as men may face gendered societal barriers to their involvement with children's learning (Kim and Hill 2015); it is also important that parental engagement with children's learning is not seen as another part of women's unpaid labour in the home (Reay 1998, Shuffelton 2015). There is evidence that including fathers/male carers in programmes to support parenting leads to better outcomes (Moullin, Waldfogel et al. 2014, Wells, Sarkadi et al. 2016). The fact that fathers may be less likely to attend programmes to support parenting (Wells, Sarkadi et al. 2016) is of particular interest in relation to the REAL programme, as it included home visits, in which fathers were said to participate more than staff had expected them to do.

The **“home learning environment”** is mentioned throughout this report. The importance of learning in this environment is again well known (Melhuish, Sylva et al. 2001), and linked to the concept of **parental engagement in children's learning** as being focused on this area, that is, learning not based in the school or setting (Goodall and Montgomery 2013, Goodall 2017).

Both of these projects may be considered instances of **parenting support**, which Moran et al (Moran, Ghate et al. 2004, 21) define as “any intervention for parents aimed at reducing risks and promoting protective factors for their children, in relation to their social, physical and emotional wellbeing.”

It may seem that this definition applies more directly to some parts of the PEF than others, and as these programmes were conceived, it is true that it is easier to see how the definition applies to Mouse Club, for example, than to the FUN activities or to the REAL program, which was aimed at improving early literacy.

While not denying the academic outcomes of these programmes, (see, for example, the increases in progress reported in the PEN project), the qualitative reports make it clear that some of the most highly valued outcomes of these programmes were in the areas of social and emotional outcomes: relationships and increases in self-confidence, for children, parents and staff.

Both PEN and REAL would seem to fall under what Britto and Engles (2015) consider as parenting education and support (rather than simply parenting support) as the intent in both programmes was to support and improve the home learning environment. The programmes also have elements of behavioural family programmes (Sanders, Markie-Dadds et al. 2000), as they functioned to help parents interact with their children. Again, this may not have been one of the stated aims of the projects, but it certainly was one of the outcomes reported for both projects. Both programmes reported increases in the amount of time parents spent with their children and improvements in the relationships between parents and children.

It is significant, as well, that both programmes take place before children start school, as this may be the most effective, and cost effective time to offer support for parents (Stevens 2014, Goodall 2017). Intervention early in children's lives may have the effect of helping prevent later problematic behaviours (Allen 2011). Parenting practices are particularly important in these early years (Barlow and Blair 2012), and interventions can help support parents' belief in their parenting abilities at this point (Young 2015).

Parents in both the PEN and REAL projects were clear that the programmes supported their parenting. They reported gains in knowledge of how to support learning as well as increased confidence in doing so. Parents also reported greater confidence (self-efficacy) in approaching school and setting staff, both to ask for help and to report successes within the home learning environment.

## **Context**

Both of the projects reported here took place in areas of significant economic disadvantage in the north of England. The fact that children growing up in such areas face a future of

educational as well as financial disadvantage, is well established (JFR Analysis Unit 2017). While the reasons for this gap are complex (Goodall 2017), and there is no agreement about them (Spitzer and Aronson 2015), it is clear that the gap in achievement which is correlated to socioeconomic background starts early (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2015). In addressing these gaps, both the PEN and REAL project have the potential to make significant contributions to the outcomes, educational and otherwise, of the children involved. It remains to be seen, however, how long lasting the effects of these programmes may be.

#### Caveat: Avoiding over generalisation

It is all too easy to fall into the trap of seeing all parents, or indeed all staff or all students, as being the same as other members of their group. It is important to note that each child, and each family, is unique and constitute a unique instance of work around parental engagement with children's learning. Each setting, too, provides an individual place of interaction for staff, who are themselves a varied group of individuals, and families. This is exemplified, for example, in the different experiences settings had with the Mouse project: for some, it worked well. Another setting, which introduced Mouse at a different time, found it to be less successful. Again, most parents were very positive about their experiences with both projects, but a very small minority expressed negative views.

Perhaps this is again best shown by the differences of opinion on the best number of visits in the REAL programme. There was little consensus about the ideal number of visits (though overall, a great deal of satisfaction with the programme).

No one programme will be successful for all settings, all families or with all children. One of the values inherent in these programmes was a flexibility within the given structures to adapt projects according to the professional judgement of practitioners.

## **Themes**

### Avoiding a deficit model of parenting

Both projects seem to have taken an asset based approach to their work with parents (Riots Communities and Victims Panel 2012, Goodall 2017). Although staff in both projects were, or later became, aware of issues in parents' knowledge and parenting practices, neither programme seems to have operated from a deficit approach to parenting (Cochran 1987, Coll and Pachter 2002, Irizarry 2009, Valencia 2010, Valencia 2012). A deficit model would suggest that parents are somehow lacking, in need of remediation. (It may be significant that



one of the few times that a member of staff spoke of “teaching” parents, this term was placed in quotation marks, differentiating it from the process undertaken with children).

A deficit model of parenting mitigates against working with parents in partnership (Goodall 2017). In both projects, staff seem to have increased their understanding of, and appreciation for, the work that families and parents do around learning.

Eisner and Meidert (2011) have pointed out that parents are more likely to attend and learn from programmes they consider to be supportive and friendly. Comments from parents in both project show that parents were, or at least became, comfortable with staff during the projects.

#### The importance of siblings and other family members

Throughout the data, but particularly in the PEN responses, it is clear that the effects of the project were more widespread than affecting merely the parents and children involved: other family members, with special mentions of siblings, took part in the activities, often to the benefit of all involved.

Children grow up in contexts which involve many people and places other than their school or setting (Bronfenbrenner 1979), even if these children often seem to be conceived of as being isolated, independent units (Goodall 2017). Britto and Engle (2015) suggest that we move beyond the term “parent” to that of “family”. Both of these projects, particularly PEN, involved family members other than the prime carers and the child. This extended involvement seems to have arisen more or less spontaneously in families, rather than by design in the project. Nevertheless, this engagement is reported to have had a beneficial effect.

#### The importance of the group

Moran et al (2004) have pointed out the value of group based support for parents, highlighting the fact that parents may benefit from the social aspect of such interventions. Previous work has also shown the value of professional discussion among teachers/staff as a means of development (Goodall, Day et al. 2005). In both PEN and REAL, parents and staff recognized the value of parent to parent support, for the purposes of reducing isolation, sharing resources and parenting ideas, general support and friendship. In the PEN responses, staff were also clear about the value they placed on interaction with other practitioners and PEN staff, as a means of professional learning.

### Parental Self-efficacy

The concept of parental self-efficacy is an increasingly important one in the literature about parental engagement. Bandura (1977) considers self-efficacy as the results of positive experiences in relation to different areas of life. Bandura goes on to point out that people are far more likely to engage in activities if they feel they have a reasonable chance of success in those activities. Applying this to parents, Green, Walker et al. (2007) have suggested that parents' desire to be involved with their children's learning is increased when parents feel confident about their abilities to be of use to their children.

In both the PEN and the REAL projects, there were reports of an increase in parents' self-efficacy, their belief that they can help their children. Parents have commented on their increased knowledge of how to support learning and often have noted their increased enjoyment in doing so.

In this vein, it is important to realise that both programmes supported parents to overcome fears of stigmatization which can exist for parents accessing support (Moran, Ghate et al. 2004, Cullen, Cullen et al. 2013, Cullen, Cullen et al. 2016, Cullen, Cullen et al. 2016, Goodall 2017).

### Support for early literacy

The REAL project had a specific emphasis on supporting early literacy. While mentions of these increases are relatively sparse in the qualitative data, it is important to note that staff reported their knowledge and confidence in supporting literacy had increased (see Table 2).

Further, many of the concepts parents mentioned as having been supported by the project, such as singing nursery rhymes and noticing environmental print, along with mark making exercises and support, are important precursors to literacy for children of this age (Sonnenschein and Munsterman 2002). Parents also reported other activities, such as reading more with their children and visiting the library, which impact on children's development in this area (Sonnenschein and Munsterman 2002). It may also be important that not only are parents doing these things more often with their children, they and their children seem to be enjoying the activities, and we have already noted that enjoyment can increase motivation to continue an activity. In earlier research on REAL, Brooks et al (2008) found that the results of the programme were more long lasting among children whose mothers had no educational qualifications; for these children, the programme seems to have helped them to achieve parenting on a par with the children of mothers who did possess such qualifications.

### School readiness

Both of the programmes have an at least an implicit aim to prepare children for school or entry into a setting. UNICEF offers the following definition of “school readiness” (and we may substitute the term, “setting” for “school” as appropriate), “[S]chool readiness encompasses children, schools and families as they acquire the competencies required for a smooth transition” (UNICEF 2012, 16). It is important that this definition does not concentrate on the child alone but encompasses the child, the family and the setting equally (See Goodall 2017 for a more indepth treatment of this concept).

Mouse CLUB, in PEN, had school/setting readiness as a specific aim, and seems to have been very largely successful in accomplishing this aim. The REAL project, as well, seems to have been effective in supporting children to gain the skills they need.

It is, however, perhaps even more important to note that in both programmes, parents and staff also experienced changes which helped them to be ready, respectively, for their children’s move to a school setting and for staff to be more aware of the children who would arrive in the setting. For staff, this readiness was increased by the knowledge they gained about the lives of families outside of and before school, and a more realistic understanding parenting skills, practices and situations.

### A changing relationship between parents and settings

Throughout both projects, there are reports from parents and staff of increased, and improved, relationships between parents and staff. Parents are reported, or report themselves to be more willing and confident to come into settings and to approach staff.

Important as we have seen this increase in parental confidence to be, perhaps even more important in the long term is the change reported by staff, who have gained knowledge about parents and their circumstances, and, significantly, skills and confidence in supporting parents. Working with parents is rarely included in the initial training of teachers or setting staff, so the training and collegial support provided by both of these projects is particularly valuable.

### Increased staff understanding and valuing of parental engagement with children’s learning.

As mentioned above and in the literature, parental engagement with children’s learning is often not including in practitioners’ initial or ongoing training (Hornby and Lafaele 2011). Staff in both projects evidenced greater appreciation of parents’ support for learning during and after the projects, commenting that they had learned much about the lives and work of

parents with their children, and the value of the home learning environment (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003, Sylva, Melhuish et al. 2008).

This is of high importance, as support for, and improving the home learning environment may be seen as one of the means of addressing the gap in achievement between children from different backgrounds (Save the Children 2013, Goodall 2017).

Another way this change can be seen is in a discernible move from giving information to parents to involving, engaging them in the learning processes of their children. Parents' reactions to these changes are also of importance, as they expressed not only how much they enjoyed supporting learning in the home, but also how much they had learned about doing so, and, significantly, how their confidence in doing so had increased.

#### Increased capacity and sustainable practice

Both programmes reported outcomes which show both increased capacity within participating settings and the groundwork for the sustainability of the work around these gains.

The increased capacity is most clearly shown in the staff reports of what they have learned, including the increased understanding and appreciation of the value of parental engagement with children's learning, and how to support that engagement. Further, many of the settings had clear plans of how they would disseminate their work beyond those already involved, spreading the learning to a wider pool of staff.

That the work will be sustained is demonstrated both explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly, many staff reported on projects that they would continue with the work in future years, and would continue to use the resources provided (or, in some cases, create their own based on what they had learned).

Implicitly, the fact that staff have reported a greater understanding of the value of parental engagement with learning and also reported increased skills and motivation to support this engagement, argues that the work may well be sustained.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Policy**

- This project adds to the literature and experiential base that many training programmes for practitioners in schools do not address the value and nature of parental engagement with children's learning
  - It would be useful for providers of training to include these issues in both initial and continued training, and for it to be a requirement to do so.
- Throughout these projects and others (Goodall 2017), parents have shown a lack of knowledge about how to support the learning of their young children. This argues a lacuna in the support offered to parents.
  - It would be useful for policy makers to investigate ways of supplementing the information given to parents, and how to do this in the way that benefits the largest number of parents.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

- Practitioners in these projects greatly valued the opportunities to share the training with staff from other settings; this professional dialogue is known to support teacher development (Goodall, Day et al. 2005, Goodall 2017).
  - It would be useful , and often cost effective, for settings and schools to come together for joint training, assuming that this training allows sufficient time for professional discussion.
- The value of home visits is well rehearsed in the literature (Hannon, Morgan et al. 2006, Communities and Panel 2012, Hermanns, Asscher et al. 2013, Young and Kernkre 2016). This has been reinforced by the value that parents and practitioners have placed on home visits in the REAL project.
  - It would be useful if settings consider if and how they can provide home visits for all or some families.
- In both projects, the involvement of family members other than parents has been important for children's learning.
  - It would be useful if settings actively acknowledge the contribution of the family members and utilize the involvement of the wider family in children's learning.

## **Recommendations for Further Research**

- Further, longitudinal research is required to see if the reported impacts for children (in both this study and the quantitative work by Oxford University (Sylva and Jelley 2017) are maintained over time.

## **Appendix 1 Data collection and analysis process**

As can be seen from the list of documents in Appendix 2, there was an extensive range of data on which to draw for this report. These data included interview transcripts, reports from staff members about their experiences of training, final reports from settings, and collated parent questionnaires.

These individual documents were all assigned a unique number, which appear in brackets throughout this report. Many of these documents were received as scans of hand written documents. Pertinent information from these documents was entered into a series of mind maps, and then arranged under thematic headings (Wheeldon and Faubert 2009, Burgess-Allen and Owen-Smith 2010, Spitzer and Aronson 2015).

Some of these headings were a priori categories, existing in the data sources themselves, such as “learning”. While it would have been possible to report all of the data under a priori headings, such as “what have you learned” or “what have you enjoyed most”, this would not have allowed the reader to take an overview of the project. Therefore, other themes were taken from the data, such as “confidence”, “enjoyment” and “engagement”.

Many comments were coded under more than one heading; for example, a comment might link enjoyment with confidence, as in, “Helped her confidence and great enjoyment with activities” [9].

At the request of the PEN staff, the data have been analysed according to the phases of the programme. There was much more data for Phase 2 and three than for any other. Data from the control groups has not been analysed.

## **Appendix 2 Documents used in reporting on the REAL programme**

There were 17 documents used in this report from the REAL programme, (see Appendix Three for a full list of documents). These documents included parent questionnaires, a follow up survey for setting involved in the project, issues in summer of 2017, and interviews with parents and staff. This section will describe these documents.

### Intervention Group Network Meeting

This meeting, involving practitioners and REAL project managers, took place on 20 November 2015. Although this meeting took place early in the project, staff were already able to report benefits from the programme and its training, both for themselves and for the families involved.

### Interviews

These interviews took place in three settings: in a library during a REAL visit with parents and children, in an office with a senior leader, and during an event in one setting, with both staff and parents.

Settings found these outcomes of sufficient value to continue the project in future years.

### Parents' Questionnaire

This questionnaire was sent to parents in spring and early summer of 2017. Responses were received from 61 parents.

### Year 2 Intervention Follow Up Survey

This was an email survey sent to settings in June of 2017, as shown in Table 1. Four responses were received to the survey. Almost all of the questions were to be answered in simple, Likert style; 10 of the 24 questions allowed free text answers, although not all settings responded to all of these.

### Summary of Reflections

This section is based on the document, "Summary of reflections". As such, the data represented in this section relates the experiences and reflections of setting staff and those with management responsibility across the area of the REAL implementation supported by the Sutton Trust. The document covers the two main areas of recruitment and retention, providing important insights not mentioned elsewhere.



## Appendix 3 List of Documents from both projects

### Documents from the REAL project

Document number	Description
R1	Roundthorn Parent Questionnaire
R2	Medlock Valley Parent Questionnaire
R3	Mayfield Parent Questionnaire
R4	Panda Coppice Parent Questionnaire
R5	Kidzmatter Parent Questionnaire
R6	Holy Cross Parent Questionnaire
R7	Heathcot Parent Questionnaire
R8	Giggle & Grow Parent Questionnaire
R9	Intervention all Responses from July 2017
R10	Oldham Library Reception Teacher Interview
R11	Oldham Library Parent 2 Interview
R12	Oldham Library Parent 1 Interview
R13	Oldham Library Staff 2 Interview
R14	Oldham Library Interviews, staff and parents
R15	Oldfield Library Parent 1 Interview (Duplicate of R12)
R16	Real Updates
R17	Summary of Reflections

## Documents from the PEN project

<b>PEN Phase</b>	<b>Document Number</b>	<b>Document Name</b>
Phase 2	1	Final Report on Rolls Crescent
Phase 2	2	Final Report on Claremont
Phase 2	3	Final Report on Irk Valley
Phase 2	4	Final Report on Rackhouse
Phase 4	5	PEN Feedback session 12.7.17
Phase 2	6	Parental Interviews
Phase 2	7	Report on Newall Green
Phase 2	9	Collaged Overall Parent Questionnaires
Phase 2	10	Final report on Harpur Mount Group 1
Phase 2	11	Final Report on Harpur Mount Group 2
Phase 2	12	Final Report on Russell Scott
Phase 2	13	Final Report on Romily
Phase 2	14	Progress made by targeted disadvantaged children as compared to overall cohort
Phase 2	15	Staff “What do you think?” questionnaires
Phase 3	16	Staff Development and Training questionnaires
Phase 3	17	Staff Development and Training (individual) <sup>21</sup>
Phase 3	18	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	19	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	20	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	21	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	22	Staff Development and Training (individual)

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<sup>21</sup> Names have been removed

Phase 3	23	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	24	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	25	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	26	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	27	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	28	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	29	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	30	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	31	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	32	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	33	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	34	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	35	Future Action Chorlton
Phase 2	36	Interviews at Claremont <sup>22</sup>
Phase 3	37	Future Action Deepdale
Phase 3	38	Future Action Poolsbrook
Phase 3	39	Future Action Poolsbrook
Phase 3	40	Future Action Whaley Thorns
Phase 3	41	Future Action Whaley Thorns
Phase 3	42	Future Action Chorlton Park
Phase 3	43	What do you think Chorlton <sup>23</sup>
Phase 3	44	What do you think Chorlton <sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Missing numbers were assigned to individual reports which also appeared in collated form

<sup>23</sup> As some documents were delivered as scans, these were assigned unique numbers for individual pages, hence the repetition.

Phase 3	45	What do you think Cholrton
Phase 3	46	What do you think Cholrton
Phase 3	47	What do you think Cholrton
Phase 3	48	What do you think Deepdale
Phase 3	50	What do you think Deepdale
Phase 3	51	What do you think Deepdale
Phase 3	52	What do you think Deepdale
Phase 3	53	What do you think Deepdale
Phase 3	54	What do you think Whaley
Phase 3	55	What do you think Whaley
Phase 3	57	What do you think Whaley
Phase 3	58	What do you think Whaley
Phase 3	59	What do you think Whaley
Phase 3	60	What do you think Poolsborough
Phase 3	61	What do you think Poolsborough
Phase 3	62	What do you think Poolsborough
Phase 3	63	What do you think Poolsborough
Phase 3	64	What do you think Poolsborough
Phase 3	66	What do you think Birch
Phase 3	67	What do you think Birch
Phase 3	68	What do you think Old Hall
Phase 3	69	What do you think Birch
Phase 3	70	What do you think Old Hall
Phase 3	71	What do you think Old Hall
Phase 3	72	What do you think Birch

Phase 3	73	What do you think Birch
Phase 3	74	What do you think Old Hall
Phase 3	75	What do you think Old Hall
Phase 3	76	What do you think Old Hall
Phase 2	77	What do you think? Staff
Phase 2	78	Final Report Rolls Crescent
Phase 2	79	Final Report Claremont
Phase 2	80	Final Report Harpur Mont 1
Phase 2	81	Final Report Harpur Mont 2
Phase 2	82	Final Report Irk Valley
Phase 4	83	St Edmund's Final Report
Phase 4	84	Phase 4 Staff Development Questionnaire
Phase 4	85	What do you think? Wilmslow Academy
Phase 4	86	Fairfield Infant and Nursery School
Phase 4	87	Future Action Wilmslow Academy
Phase 4	88	Future Action St Edmund's RC Primary
Phase 4	89	What do you think, The Heys
Phase 4	90	What do you think, Hillside Community School
Phase 4	91	What do you think, Fairfield Infants School
Phase 4	92	What do you think, St. Edmunds
Phase 4	93	Poolsbrook parent responses
Phase 4	94	Poolsbrook parent responses
Phase 3	95	Parents What do you think
Phase 4	96	Parent responses "What do you think?" September 2017
All phases	97	

Trial phase	98	
Phase 4	99	Future Action
Phase 4	100	Staff, What did you think?
Phase 4	101	Staff Development and Training (individual)
Phase 3	102	Future Action Deepdale

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